Book Review

Joshua Clover 2016 *Riot. Strike. Riot: The new era of uprisings,* London, Verso Books. ISBN: 978-1-78478-059-3

No doubt, riots are on the rise in the West. London, Ferguson, Athens—there's been a significant upswing of violent protests on our streets, flashing across our TV and computer screens in sensationalised bursts. In mainstream discussion, the word "riot" connotes danger, violence, amorality—outbursts that need to be neutralised as quickly as possible so life can return to normal. In fact, the media is so pre-occupied with the violence of riots that it can be difficult for us to notice anything else about them.

In *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (2016), Joshua Clover helps us see past the moral panic around violent riots. Throughout this smart, provocative book, the Californian communist provides valuable insight on why riots erupt when and where they do, and why they have emerged in recent years as a crucial mode of rebellion.

One of the book's early revelations is that the media's over-fascination with 'violence' serves to deny the riot's political legitimacy, as well as the rioters' humanity. Clover tells us that the sensationalised rhetoric of the violent riot "…becomes a device of exclusion, aimed not so much against 'violence' but against specific social groups" (2016: 12). By characterising rioters as thoughtless brutes, we perpetuate old prejudiced notions that poor and/or racialised subjects are animalistic, irrational and invalid. Furthermore, he tells us, how the "…insistence on the violence of the riot effectively obscures the daily, systemic, and ambient violence that stalks daily life…" for many of these marginalised subjects (2016: 12). Undoubtedly, violence is committed during riots. But, by focusing solely on the destruction caused by rioters, we lose any indication that these people are reacting to the structural harm inflicted on them by the oppressive mechanisms of the state.

The characterisation of riots as fundamentally violent and irrational also strategically strips rioters of their political legitimacy. Clover tells us that the equivocation of violence and riot is "…an essential tool in the political reduction of the riot, its cordoning off from politics proper" (2016: 39). In denouncing violent resistance, media pundits and political leaders often encourage kinder, gentler forms of protest; however, Clover tells us that, for the disenfranchised, the idea that a peaceful march, or a strike, can fundamentally alter their circumstances is pure moralistic illusion.

From here, Clover goes on to make perhaps the book's boldest claim: that riots have become more prevalent, because in our modern neoliberal economies, pacifistic, labour-centred strategies are becoming more useless. He believes that populations can no longer confront the problem of their livelihood in the realm of labour struggle (i.e., through a strike), due to the cumulative effects of globalisation and political mobilisation against workers' rights. In place of the strike, Clover writes, for the dispossessed trying to remake society, the riot has emerged as "the form of collective action through which struggle must pass" (2016: 123). With the imminent rise of automation and unemployment, Clover predicts that labour actions—like strikes or occupations—will only become more irrelevant to proletarian struggles. If there's no work to refuse, and no workplaces to occupy, how can one possibly strike to improve the conditions of their life?

While Clover is right to decentralise labour as the context for struggle, one can't help but feel that he's being overly hasty (perhaps, decidedly controversial) in claiming that labour-centred struggle is dead and buried. It remains unclear whether he has seriously considered the ways labour movements could adapt to the changing structure of our economies. While it is difficult to imagine that labour organising alone can fundamentally transform society, if we are to witness revolutionary change in our lifetimes surely it will still be a vital element of such a practice. The kind of collective mass action capable of fundamentally transforming society will require the combined efforts of workers and disenfranchised subjects. Now, more than ever, we need strategies that will bring the working-class and the underclass together, and reassert their power to direct and change economies to suit their collective needs.

As Clover himself says in the book's final pages, revolutionary change is "unthinkable without the modulation from traditional working class to an expanded proletariat. That is to say, it is not oriented by productive labourers, but rather by the heterogeneous population of those without reserves" (2016: 189). If there is to be an emancipatory future, we must look to forms of struggle which can bring together all marginalised peoples – both the employed and unemployed – in ways that address the changing economic landscape.

No doubt this is a very stimulating and intelligent work of political-economic theory. Despite its flaws, Clover has done something very important here: politically legitimising riots as a form of rebellion. Rather than being the domain of the unthinking and animalistic thugs, Clover gives the riot its due as a politically coherent form of protest. Considering the little room the media has for nuance, debate, and critical thinking around the nature and prevalence of riots, the book comes as a welcome relief.

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Book Review

Tim Winton 2015 *Island Home*, Penguin AU, Sydney: ISBN 9780143574095.

Tim Winton's *Island Home* (2015) carries the sub-title 'A landscape memoir', and it will not surprise readers of Winton's fiction that he handles the elastic form of the memoir with novelistic flair. He eschews conventional chronology, arranging a looser narrative mosaic befitting the mode of peripheral perception he celebrates: the power of 'vision beyond mere glimpsing', as he puts it in his earlier essay bearing the same sub-title, 'Strange passion: a landscape memoir' (1999).

In pairing the conventionally distinct modes of representation into a single generic form—the geographical and autobiographical, and we might say, the pictorial and literary—he immediately alters customary understandings of the memoir as a variation on the 'life story'. The generic conflation serves his purpose of encouraging Australians to learn to 'see' in ways more attuned to concepts of land and place.

Winton's public admissions that he is very much a reluctant environmental activist (though activist no less) might have earnt him the disapproval of the more radical political agitator or determined protester. Yet, it is the absence of dogmatic protest and moral vehemence in *Island Home* that award his narrative its full strength. His criticisms of the venal nature of contemporary Australian politics and the resulting distortions reflected in the wider social and cultural realm are expressed in forthright yet measured terms. Of the wilful neglect of Perth's gravely ailing Swan River, Winton pulls no punch: "The Swan is desperately sick. And although a simple cure is ready to hand, the river is put on life support. Those pumps are emblematic of a city and political culture for whom the glib fix and the photo-op will always be first choice" (47). But then, by way of changing the subject, he concludes that, "[T]he 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" (49).

Reliance on the powerful metaphor of family presents a challenge to the reader in both senses. To see the land in familial terms is to understand our relationship with country as one of profound responsibility. "This country leans in on you. It weighs down hard. Like family. To my way of thinking, it is family," (23). It 'weighs down hard' for the very reason that the land supports us, and that we therefore rely on it in the most fundamental, mutually supportive sense.

For this reader, Winton's continued experiment with the literary innovation of the 'landscape memoir' is entirely convincing, as much for his graceful mastery of the written word as for the animating energy of his genuine passion for his subject. True to his much-lauded literary talents, Winton holds up to the receptive reader a scenically vibrant, robustly dynamic picture of the vast and diverse land on which we are all camped, temporary visitors as all humans beings are. As he rightly insists, "It's good for the spirit, to be reminded as an individual or a community that there will always be something bigger, older, richer and more than ourselves to consider" (27-8). In doing so, readers are spared the tiresomely confessional details, trivial gossiping and highly confected 'dramas' of the many 'lives' retailed in the heavily marketed memoirs of recent years.

It should be said that Winton's insistence that Australia is 'wild' might rankle some readers; others might in turn question his at-times romanticised recollections of a boyhood enjoyed in the boundless bush of his now-suburbanised 'homeland' (even as Winton himself notes the tendency in himself to romanticise). The claim that Australians on the whole are beginning to 'commit' to the land 'in a spirit of kinship to the place itself' (222) also invites scepticism. Yet, the fact that Winton anticipates such criticisms, and matter-of-factly incorporates these and like objections into the narrative, bespeaks both a reassuring modesty and matured perspective.

Above all, the strength of Winton's work is in the concentration on his deep moral concern with, and artistic commitment to, our collective human potential. In his view, this is inseparable from our collective need to foster "a mental step forward" in our understanding of our place *in place*: "an emotional deepening … [that] takes humility and patience to see what truly lies before us" (203). To see, in the nuanced, precise sense he encourages, is to nurture an awareness of one's deepest connection to place; it is to begin to understand how one's sense of identity and self is always 'in-formed' by this very specific place. "To be properly awake and aware of our place," as he says in the essay 'Strange Passion', is to know hope; and to learn to *be in place* is to accept and cherish the fact that "this earth is our home, our only home" (xx). In Winton's skilled hands, that simple and urgent message carries its full weight, not through didactic insistence but through the keen, unfussy lyricism of an assured literary artist.

References

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