

Fictionalizing the Wiradjuri
dictionary:
Tara June Winch's linguistic solution
to literary domination in *The Yield*

A transnational and decolonial perspective on
relations of power in the literary world

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Elaborating a fiction around the Wiradjuri dictionary in order to claim its literariness

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I. Representing unequal linguistic-literary spaces

1. The non-naïve representation of the literary world traversed by relations of power
 - Lack of **diversity** in world literature: “But in every mobile-library book, she could never find herself or her sister. Never a girl like August and Jedda Gondiwindi, not ever.” (62)
 - Metaphor of language as a **weapon**: “*the pen was as important as the sword, [...] words were paramount*” (246 my emphasis).
 - **Irony** towards the minimal definition of dictionaries as neutral: “The dictionary from Elsie is why I’m writing down – it was my introduction to the idea of recording, written just like the Reverend manager wrote rations at the Station and just like the ma’ams and masters wrote our good behaviour at the Boy’s Home – a list of words any fool can look up and be told the meaning.” (2)
 - Albert’s **corrective linguistic-literary project** : “When I was on the letter W in the Oxford English Dictionary, *wiray* would be in that section, it means “no”. *Wiray* wasn’t there though, but I thought I’d make it there. Wheat was there, but when I skipped ahead not our word for wheat – not *yura*. So I thought I’d make my own list of words.” (11-12)
 - An **anti-alphabetical order** for a **counter-hegemonic project**: “We don’t have a Z word in our alphabet, I reckon, so I thought I’d start backwards, a nod to the backwards whitefella world I grew up in, start at Y – *yarrany...*” (12)

1. Representing unequal linguistic-literary spaces

2. The genealogy of the domination of the Australian Indigenous Wiradjuri language

- Anaphor to **denounce political and linguistic domination**: “Problem is they didn’t let the Aborigine straddle the world he knew best – *no more* language or hunting, or ceremonies. *No more* of our lore, only their law was forced.” (41, my emphasis)
- **Pathetical** mood and enumeration technique: “That’s what we were – isolated – from our family, from our language, from our cultural ways and from our land.” (284)
- A **double liberation**, from a double political and a linguistic-literary domination, in a **bilingual sentence** using a Wiradjuri notion – the fear of speaking: “I was afraid to speak for so long, for so much of my life, but I’m not anymore. I refuse to *giya-rra-ya-rra!*” (283-284)

I. Representing unequal linguistic-literary spaces

3. Language and the land

- A “returning novel” (van Neerven) centering around the claim of a Native title
- A *bildungsroman* with August on a quest to save her land, facing **obstacles**: “Couldn’t ever happen [claiming the land through Native title] I’ll tell you why – there’s no artefacts. No water in Murrumby, no fish – and fishing would mean Nana, or whoever’s living here, would have a cultural connection to the land to maintain, the ... well, ‘resources’ – okay? Another thing, **there’s no language here. Our people’s language is extinct, no-one speaks it any more so they can tick that box on their government form that says ‘loss of cultural connection’.**” (146)
- Albert’s manuscript contains decisive **proof** for the Native Title application: “They [the scientists and anthropologists] said the Gondiwindi ticked the boxes to classify as a civilization. The evidence of their civilization, after so many years of farming, was difficult to find on the surface of the land. But they said **it was embedded in the language of Albert’s dictionary**, that with the Reverend’s list and all the words too, that it would now be recognized as a resurrected language, brought back from extinction.” (307)

II. Using translation as an operation bringing official recognition

1. Resurrecting an old language and passing it down to the next generations
 - **Ambivalence** of the settler's **celebration** of Indigenous artifacts as relics of the past
 - **Opposition** between Albert's dictionary and the Falstaffs' collection of artifacts at the Historical Museum Australia
 - **Catachresis** obscured by **homophony**: "she'd realized then the purpose of their history class where they'd been mentioned like important footnotes, just like the purpose of the museum, how it felt like a nod – polite and reverent and doused in guilty wonder – of a time that had now passed. **Past or passed** she thought." (263-264)
 - Albert's project is **decolonial** because it is inscribed in a **long time**, refusing the stereotype of the pre-modern:
 - A language still evolving: "a work in progress." (313)
 - The present tense: "Maybe you are looking for a statue, or a bench by the banks of the Murrumbidgee to honour the people who have lived by the river. [...] Better words and better we are still here and that we speak them." (310)

II. Using translation as an operation bringing official recognition

2. Bilingualism as a sign of domination?

- Power relation complexified in the epistolary part
 - Reverend Greenleaf has to be “flexible with words” and “open to translation” (152)
 - Resistance of Indigenous peoples maintaining their spirituality: “At first, I thought that Baymee was their word for God, but deep down I think I knew it wasn’t. I think I always knew we were praising their own God in the absence of mine.” (152)
- Ironic subversion in the serialised letter
 - The Reverend must learn the language to try and convert Indigenous peoples: “Baumann [Greenleaf’s friend Pastor] suggested that I learn some of the Blacks of Massacre Plains language. That I should integrate them into sermons if I were to truly have them converted to the Bible. Over the years I have tried.” (100-101)

II. Using translation as an operation bringing official recognition

3. A digraphic fiction generating literary capital for the Wiradjuri language
 - A “**digraphic work**” (Casanova drawing on Ricard)
 - **Elaboration of a fiction plot** based on the Wiradjuri dictionary compiled by “Dr Uncle Stan Grant Snr AM and linguist Dr John Rudder” (Author’s note 339)
 - **Allegorical** function of the fictionalizing process: “The experiences of the fictional Gondiwindi family reflect those experienced by all Indigenous people touched by violence, segregation, abuse and the dehumanising policies and practices of colonialism” (339)
 - Creation of a community of Wiradjuri speakers and readers – albeit beginners

III. Questioning the model of aesthetic autonomy diffused by literary centers

1. Interrogating the attribution of value in the world republic of arts and humanities
 - Casanova's "**Meridian of Greenwich**" as a spatial metaphor to refer to the dominant **criterion of the autonomy of art**
 - Reflection on **global imperialism** through August's internal focalization taking a detour through Antiquity and referring to the Romans as "brutal conquerors or bringers of civilization" (245-246)
 - Metatextual reflection on the **determination of artistic value**: "She was trying to figure out how people valued a thing, what made something revered while other things were overlooked. Who decided what was out with the old, what had to have a replacement? What traditions stayed and what tools, household items, art, things, evidence of someone, languages, fell away. But when she tried to draw a vague line to the artefacts of Prosperous she was stumped – why the artefacts of Middlesbrough were important and not those from home." (247)

III. Questioning the norm of aesthetic autonomy diffused by literary centers

2. Refusing the norm of aesthetic autonomy as the criterion for literary modernity

- Already a refusal of aesthetic autonomy in the short story “It’s too difficult to explain” (Griffiths)
- The statement about the “death of the author” is highly political, particularly in a settler colonial context
- The *coolamon* as a synecdoche of Winch’s work decolonizing the borders drawn by the Meridian of Greenwich
 - A **transnational object** of wonder referred to with a **meliorative lexicon**: “What a thing to see – all that red earth and all those flowers. It was special to us.” (92)
 - **Ekphrasis** description highlighting the sophistication of Indigenous arts and craft: “August touched the lip of the *coolamon*, the thin rough red wood sloped into a long bowl, dark ochre and white were painted in intricate, blending patterns down the length of its base.” (92)
 - A metatextual image illustrating Winch’s claiming of a “certificate of literariness” for herself

III. Questioning the model of aesthetic autonomy diffused by literary centers

3. A decolonial experimental book

- *The Yield's* “experimental temperament” (Sharrad) leads to a decolonial “epistemic disobedience” (Tlostanova & Mignolo)
 - **Hybridization** of textual genres: prose narration, epistolary and dictionary
 - **Multidisciplinary** influences and metatextual images
 - Cousin Joey’s anticolonial video game: “He [Joey] made an app, had this idea in juvie. [...] It’s so good; it’s called *Get’em*. It’s this game where you fight the colonisers – you can pick your weapons and which country you want to fight for and everything” (Winch 64)
 - **Musicality** of Albert’s linguistic-literary project: “The tape Albert had made was his **recital**, his private sermon, going through a list of words, trying as he did to work out or remember how they were pronounced. It was special to the whole town, having that recording of his voice, him speaking the old language, kept safe. Digitized. Forever” (Winch 306)

Conclusion

- Linguistic-literary domination as one of *The Yield's* themes through the elaboration of a plot based on the first written compilation of a dictionary of an oral, colonized language
- The Wiradjuri language as a dominated one but also a platform for resistance
- *Mise en abyme* showing translation as an operation to grant official recognition to Wiradjuri language and literature
- Generation of linguistic-literary capital by the digraphic work creating a community of Wiradjuri polyglots inside and outside the diegesis
- Decolonial experiments with literary genres
- Refusal of the norm of aesthetic autonomy as the criterion for literary modernity and of the colonial borders drawn by the Meridian of Greenwich

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