A post-Mabo Indigenous bildungsroman

Reading *The Yield* as a Sovereignty Novel writing/talking back to Native Title

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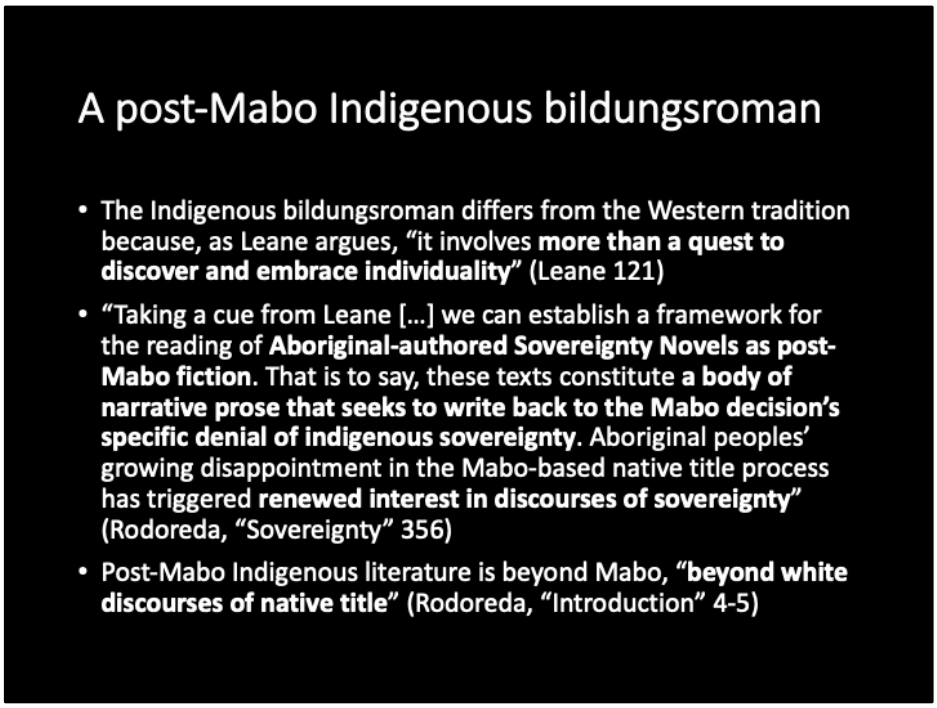
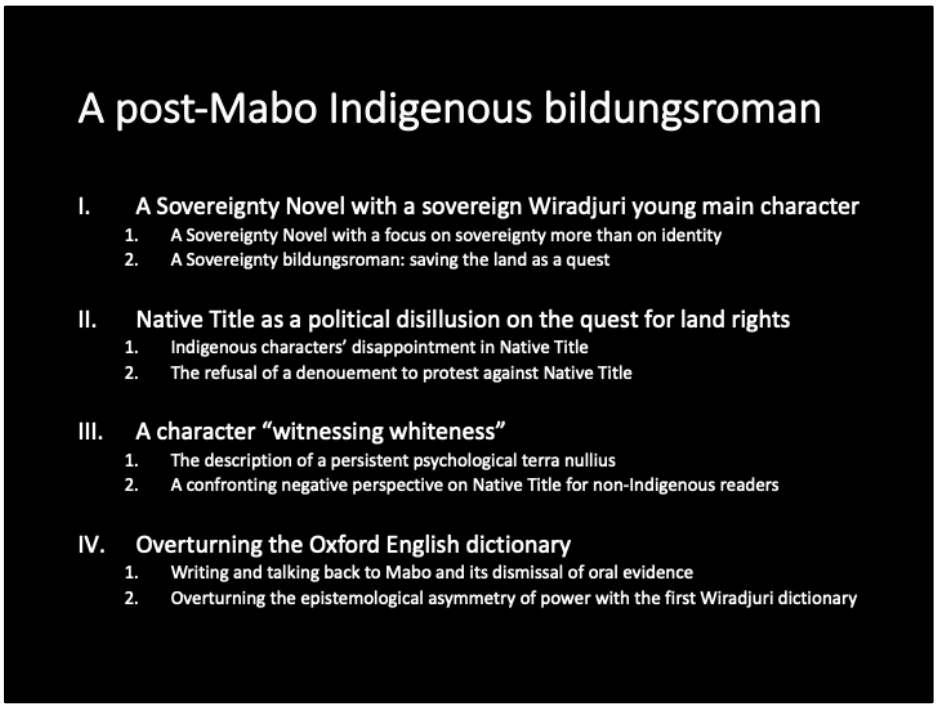
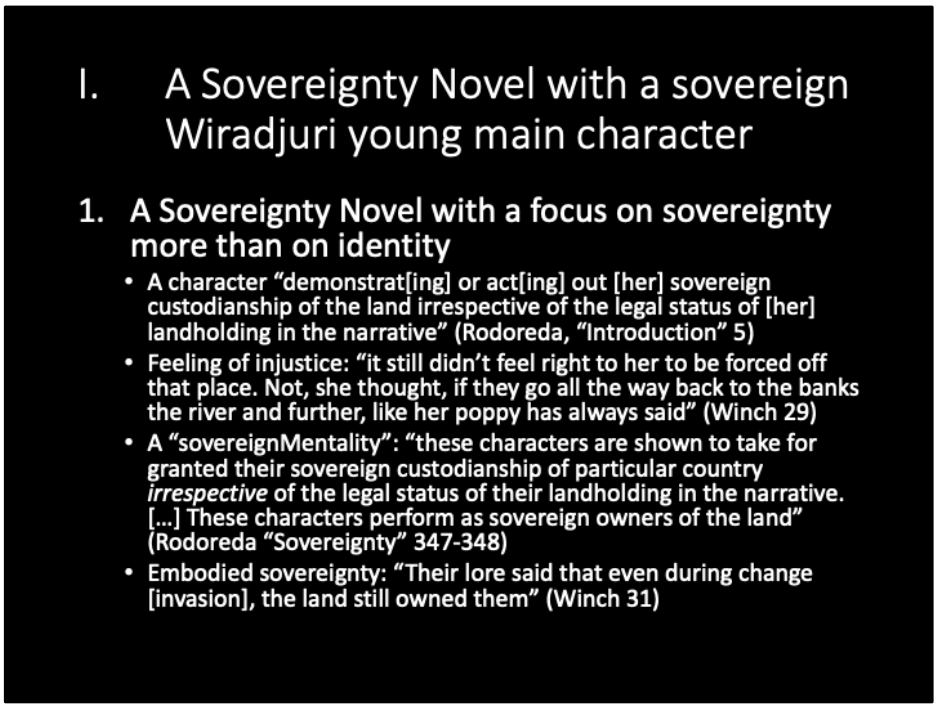


In her book chapter dedicated to Australian Aboriginal Young Adult Fiction, Wiradjuri writer Jeanine Leane offers a new perspective on the genre of the bildungsroman. She shows how it differs from the Western tradition dating back to the 18th century (Leane, 107). Focussing on its character's "understanding and acceptance of their sense of being in relation to collective family history", the Indigenous bildungsroman indeed "involves more than a quest to discover and embrace individuality" (Leane 121). For Leane, this "individuali[stic]" approach to identity construction is more of a feature of the Western bildunsgrsoman as a result of its emergence during the Enlightenment (Leane 107). Leane thus advocates for readings that take into account "the sociocultural and historical context" from which the authors and works stem from (Leane 122). Following her call to take into account the political nature of Indigenous writing, Geoff Rodoreda has proposed in 2018 a definition of Indigenous post-Mabo literature: "Taking a cue from Leane […] we can establish a framework for the reading of Aboriginal-authored Sovereignty Novels as post-*Mabo* fiction. That is to say, these texts constitute a body of narrative prose that seeks to *write back* to the *Mabo* decision's specific denial of indigenous sovereignty. Aboriginal peoples ' growing disappointment in the *Mabo*-based native title process has triggered renewed interest in discourses of sovereignty" (Rodoreda, "Sovereignty" 356). Despite the term "post-Mabo" being widely used, a characterization of post-Mabo

literature was long-awaited, especially one highlighting the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous writing (Rodoreda, “Introduction” 24). Indeed, argues Rodoreda, for non-Indigenous literature, the prefix “post” means that it is written after Mabo and in reference to it, whereas for Indigenous literature the same prefix means beyond Mabo, “beyond white discourses of native title” (Rodoreda, “Introduction” 4-5). Indigenous post-Mabo literature writes back to Mabo, it criticizes the current Native Title regime as dissatisfactory for being based on white conceptualizations of sovereignty.

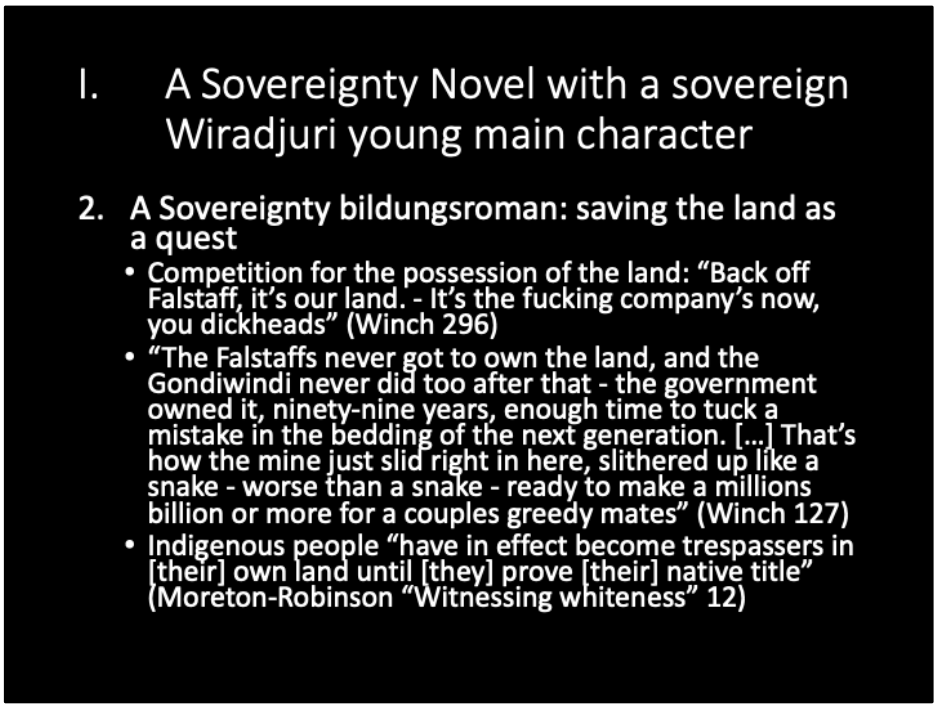


Based on close-readings, this paper seeks to read Tara June Winch's third novel *The Yield* as a post-Mabo Indigenous bildungsroman, using the socio-political framework of sovereignty novels to explore how this work writes and talks back to Native Title. Published in 2019, *The Yield* is composed of three different types of texts: a third-person realist novel telling the story of young Wiradjuri August Gondiwindi returning to her ancestral land in Australia, which alternates with a 19th century letter signed by a priest, Reverend Greenleaf, who founded a Mission on the same lands, and a list of Wiradjuri words compiled by August's grandfather Albert in order to reclaim their ancestral language that was forbidden during colonisation. Returning home to Australia after years of expatriation in England for the burial of her grand-father, August soon finds out that her grand-mother is about to be expropriated by a tin mine. She sets on a quest to stop the mine and searches the book that her grand-father was working on when he died, hoping it would allow her to claim a native title by containing proofs of the continuity of her culture. The book ends as August finds her grand-father's book and coincidentally Greenleaf's letter as well her ancestors' artefacts, although it remains unsure if it will lead to a success in court, as the novel ends before the judgment.

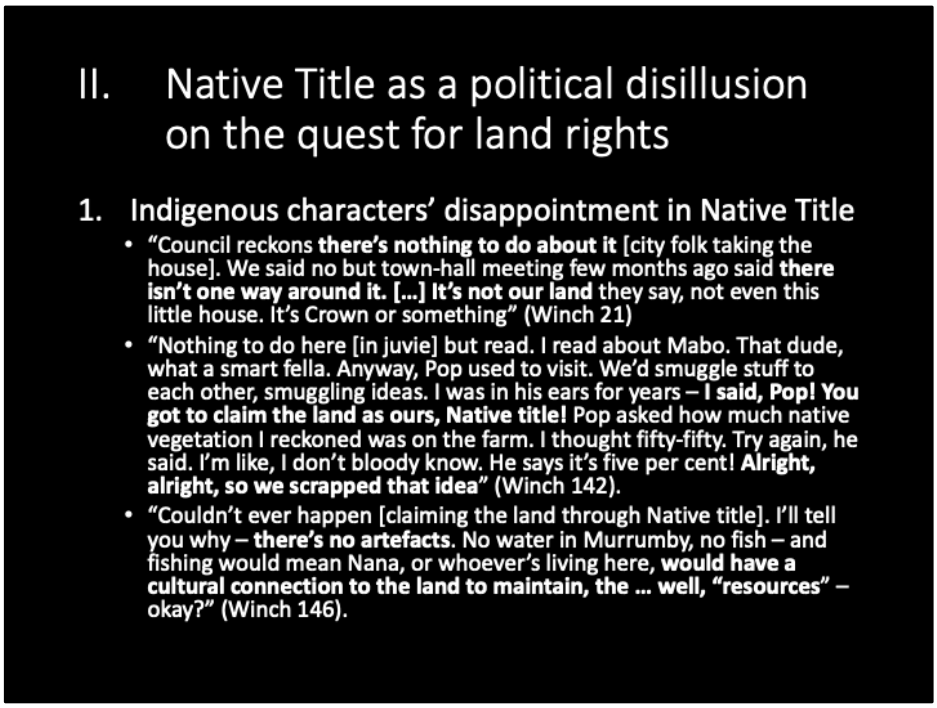


The Yield's main character acts as a sovereign Wiradjuri person, despite her rights to land not being acknowledged within the novel. With a main character who is confident in her Indigenous identity and a plot revolving around land ownership, *The Yield* belongs to post-Mabo Indigenous fiction as Rodoreda has defined it, with its main focus on sovereignty, after two decades of life writing mainly centered on identity (Rodoreda "Sovereignty" 344 and 347). As a character "demonstrat[ing] or act[ing] out [her] sovereign custodianship of the land irrespective of the legal status of [her] landholding in the narrative", August's characterization is congruent with that of Sovereignty Novels (Rodoreda, "Introduction" 5). Through internal focalisations, *The Yield* indeed tells how her Wiradjuri character feels sovereign, even if she is dispossessed in the plot. This contradiction between sovereignty and dispossession sparks a feeling of injustice in the character who will set her on a quest to save her ancestral land. With her strong sense of place and her custodian quest, August embodies Indigenous sovereignty, despite it being denied to her in the novel. This is, according to Rodoreda, an important feature of post-Mabo indigenous fiction works. Their characters display a "sovereignMentality": they "are shown to take for granted their sovereign custodianship of particular country *irrespective* of the legal status of their landholding in the narrative. […], they are represented as having a knowledge of specific country and as having retained responsibilities for caring for country. […]: it is

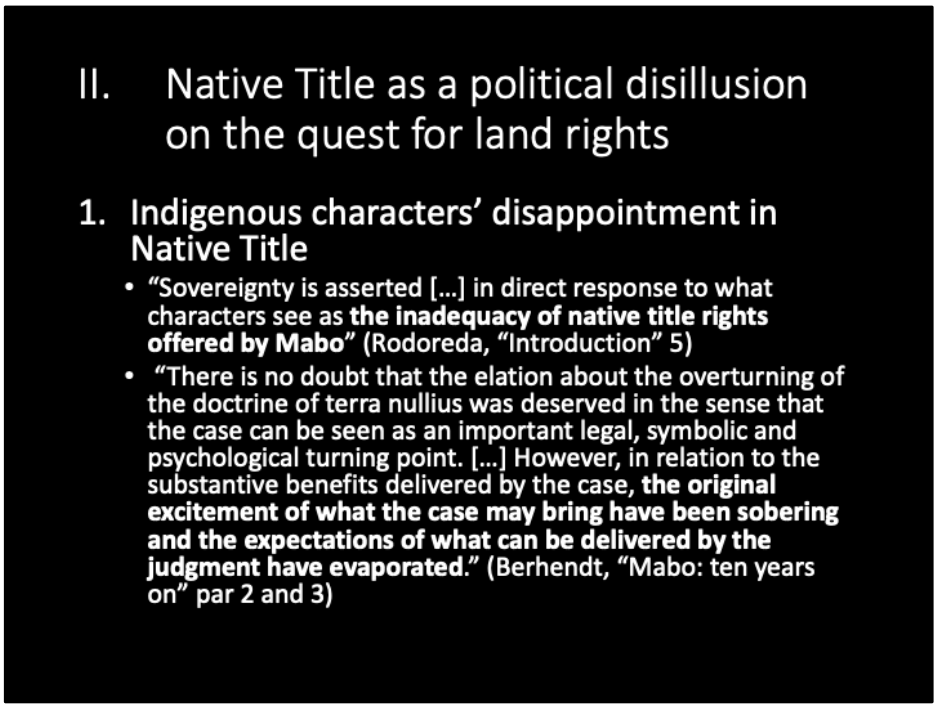
a way of thinking or a state of mind of characters in Aboriginal fiction who are self-assured of their identity and their communal/ancestral bonds to a specific place regardless of who technically owns the land within the colonized nation-space of the novel. These characters perform as sovereign owners of the land" (Rodoreda "Sovereignty" 347-348). August was educated by her grand-father Albert from the age of 8 and she has inherited his ancestral knowledge and worldview, including a sense of embodied sovereignty.



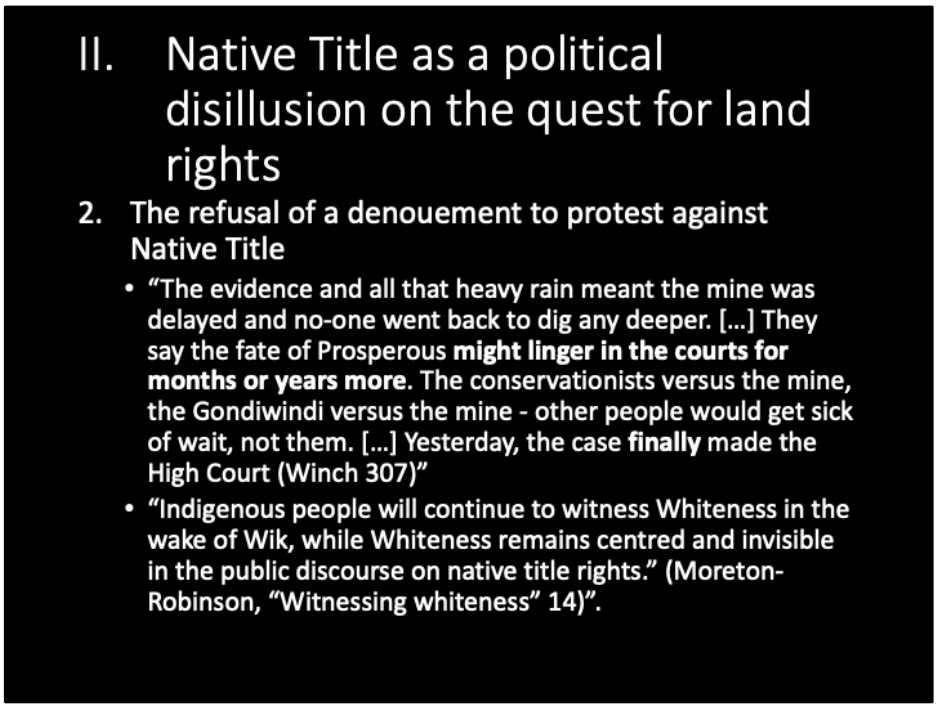
August was raised by her grand-parents, who are proud Indigenous peoples, on Country, the traditional lands of the Gondiwindis, despite them having been appropriated in the early times of settlement. A Mission was established on those lands at the end of the 19th century by Reverend Greenleaf and was replaced by a farm run by the Falstaff family after World War One. The competition for the possession of the land is at the heart of the plot, The settler family Falstaff loses what they thought was their land to the benefit of Rinepalm Mining Company, with the approval of the Federal Government; but this land is originally the Gondiwindis who have been dispossessed upon settlement. Albert explains that the Falstaffs' heirs ignored that their ancestor didn't pay for freehold and thus exposed themselves when inviting the mining company to survey their land in the hope of making bigger profits. Albert compares the mining company to a snake, illustrating how it used a breach. Feeling sovereign but being dispossessed of her land in the colonized space of the novel, she must claim a Native Title in order to achieve her quest. The contradiction between the sovereignty embodied by the character and her legal status as an Indigenous person who still needs to prove her attachment to land in order to claim a native title illustrates the fact that Indigenous people "have in effect become trespassers in [their] own land until [they] prove [their] native title" (Moreton-Robinson "Witnessing whiteness" 12).



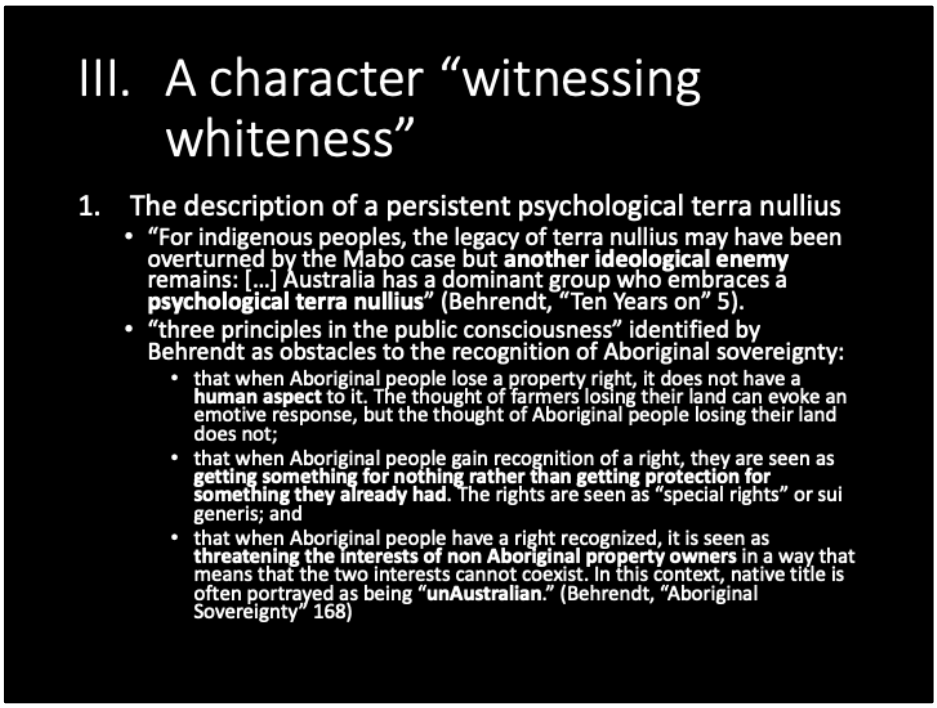
August's first political disillusion concerns her dispossession. Considering claiming a Native Title, she soon has to face her relatives' resignation, even if they could have been allies in her quest to stop the mine. Her cousin Joey explains her how he too, despite his admiration for Mabo, had to give up on this idea after discussing with their grand-father. Many Gondiwindis have given up on the idea of claiming a Native Title, because they expect to not be able to bring the evidence required by the courts. The violence of invasion means that Native Title is very difficult to claim because of the lack of evidence accepted. Native titles, as they have been defined since the Mabo decision, thus constitute a disillusion for the Indigenous characters for whom they represent an almost insurmountable obstacle on the road to land rights. This negative perspective on native titles can be confronting to non-Indigenous readers as the Mabo decision is generally considered by the dominant majority as a historic step towards the acknowledgment of First Nations peoples 'rights and one overturning the doctrine of terra nullius - according to which the Crown could claim sovereignty on the continent because it was uninhabited.



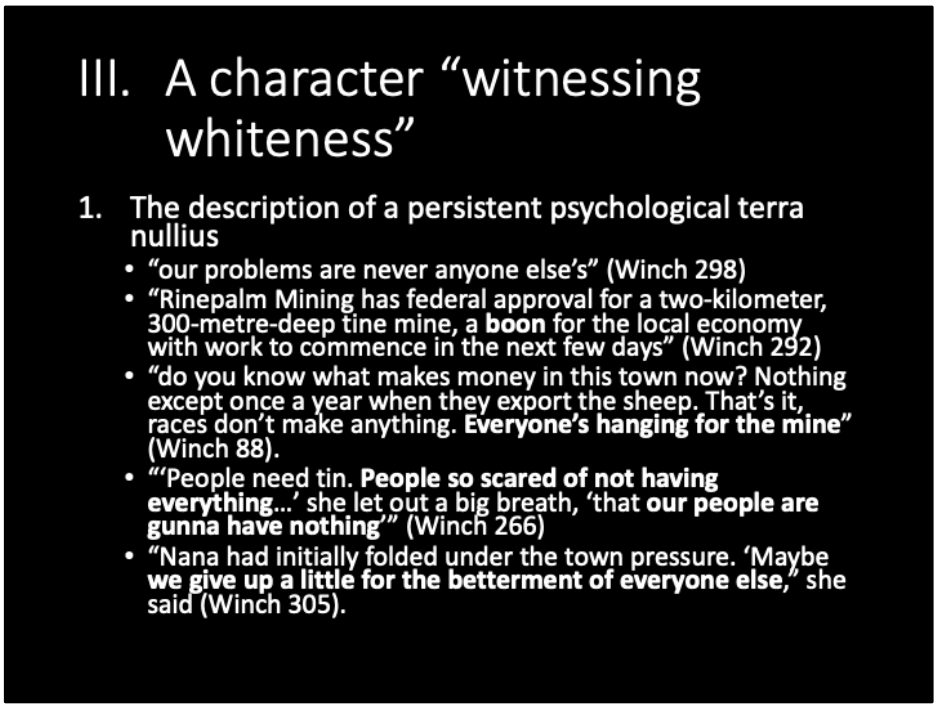
With its Indigenous characters expressing their disappointment with Native Titles, *The Yield* is as a work where "sovereignty is asserted […] in direct response to what characters see as the inadequacy of native title rights offered by Mabo", as per Rodoreda's definition of what he calls Sovereignty Novels (Rodoreda, "Introduction" 5). *The Yield* thus echoes the disappointment expressed by Indigenous people such as Eualeyai / Kamillaroi lawyer and writer Larissa Behrendt in her "ten years assessment" of the *Mabo* Case, where she explains that "~~[…]~~ the original excitement of what the case may bring have been sobering and the expectations of what can be delivered by the judgment have evaporated." (Berhendt, "Mabo: ten years on" par 2 and 3).



The Yield writes back to Mabo by exemplifying how its main character is confronted to the difficulties of claiming a native title. By setting land rights as her quest and the current native title regime as an obstacle, the novel denounces Mabo as being practically tokenistic. In particular the burden of the proof is pointed in the novel as the main obstacle encountered by the Gondiwindis to claim a native title. On top of the environmental changes and disappearance of artefacts, the near-extinction of the language adds to their difficulty of claiming a Native Title. As the novel comes to its end, the mine is interrupted following heavy rains that have uncovered many skeletons, bearing witness to the Gondi's presence. Coincidentally, August finds Albert's draft book as well as her ancestors' artefacts that were kept under the name of Falstaff at the Historical Museum. The unresolved ending of *The Yield* points to the complexity of lodging a claim under the current regime: "They say the fate of Prosperous might linger in the courts for months or years more. […] Yesterday, the case finally made the High Court (307)". August's unresolved quest to gaining native title echoes the disappointment expressed by Goenpul writer Moreton-Robinson at the end of her article on the Wik case: "Indigenous people will continue to witness Whiteness in the wake of Wik, while Whiteness remains centred and invisible in the public discourse on native title rights." (Moreton-Robinson, "Witnessing whiteness" 14)".

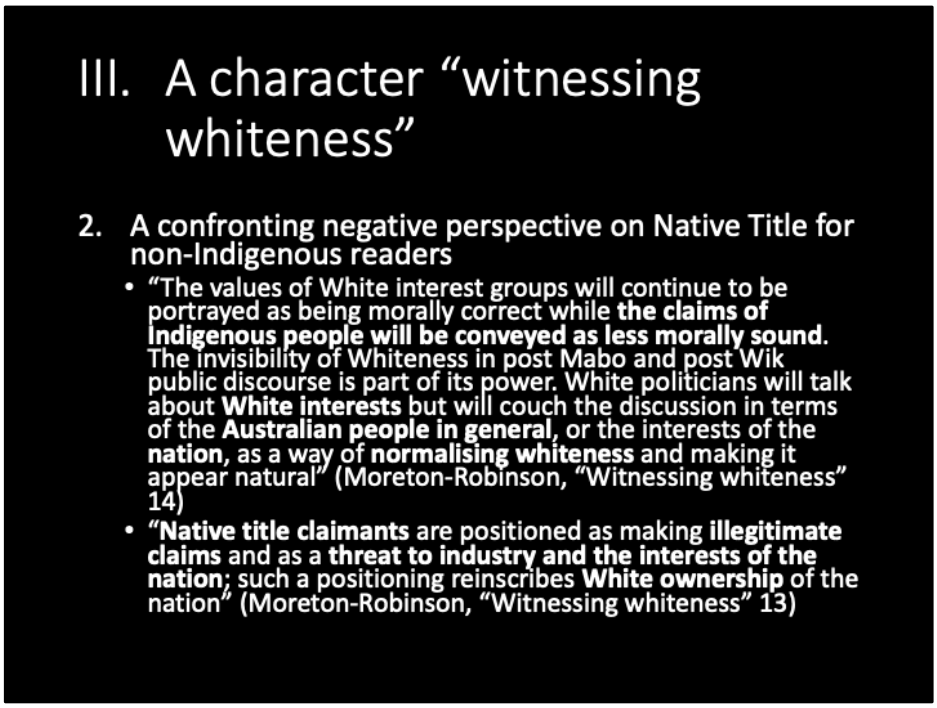


While evolving in a context where the legal fiction of terra nullius has officially been overturned since the Mabo decision, the young character still faces what Behrendt calls a "psychological terra nullius". The prefix" post" may wrongly suggest a chronological delineation, but *The Yield* isn't a post-Mabo novel in the sense that the mentality of terra nullius would be completely overcome by now (Rodoreda, "Introduction" 6-7). Written in a social-realist vein, *The Yield* calls for a political reading that takes into account the socio-historical context to which it refers. The novel reflects the "principles in the public consciousness" identified by Behrendt as obstacles to the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty.

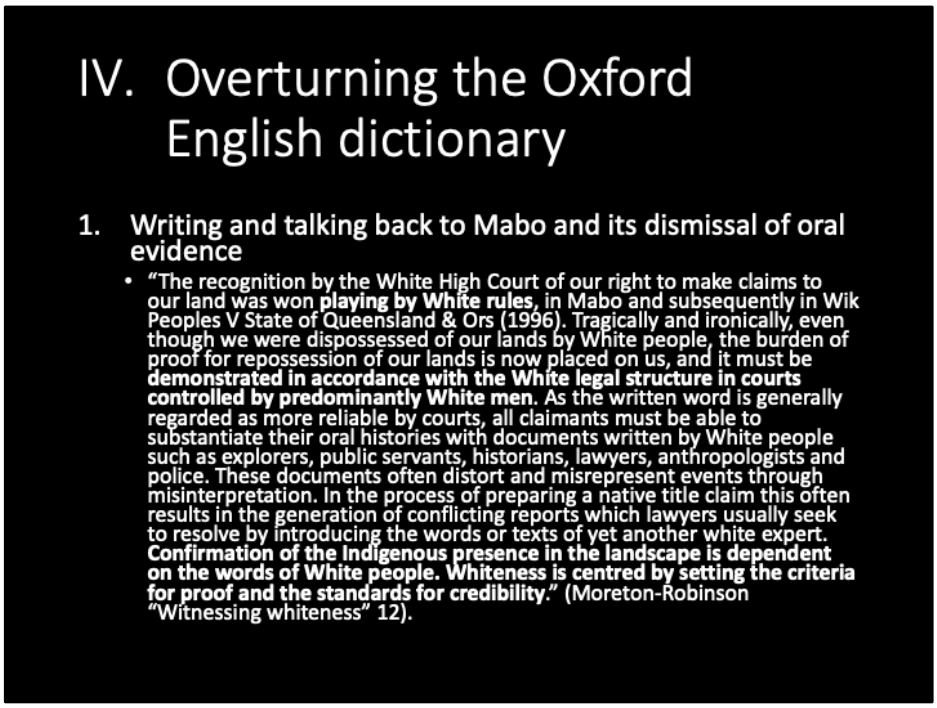


Indeed The isolation of the Gondiwindis within the town, with the exception of the non-indigenous environmental activists, illustrates how they are treated inhumanely. Instead of directing their sympathy to the Gondis for their dispossession, the inhabitants of Massacre reserve it for the mine. The Gondiwindis 'expropriation and destruction of their ancestral land doesn't attract the sympathy of the non-Indigenous communities of the town because their rights to land are perceived as competing with the rest of the town's interests, which are depicted as general interests. As August says : "our problems are never anyone else's" (298). Winch depicts a rural area striving to survive economically where mining represents an opportunity to the majority. Indigenous land rights are thus seen as competing with the other citizens' interests and as hindering the nation's economic development. Winch confronts systemic racism by showing how Indigenous land rights are seen as special rights threatening the rights of all the other Australians. A symmetrical phrase construction highlights the asymmetry of power between social groups: "'People need tin. People so scared of not having everything…' she [Aunt Missy] let out a big breath, 'that our people are gunna have nothing'" (Winch 266). In *The Yield*, Wiradjuris 'rights to land are seen by the other Australians as divisive and a threat to their own. This perception, according to Behrendt, is a falsehood that derives from a non-Indigenous understanding of the concept of sovereignty (Behrendt, "Aboriginal

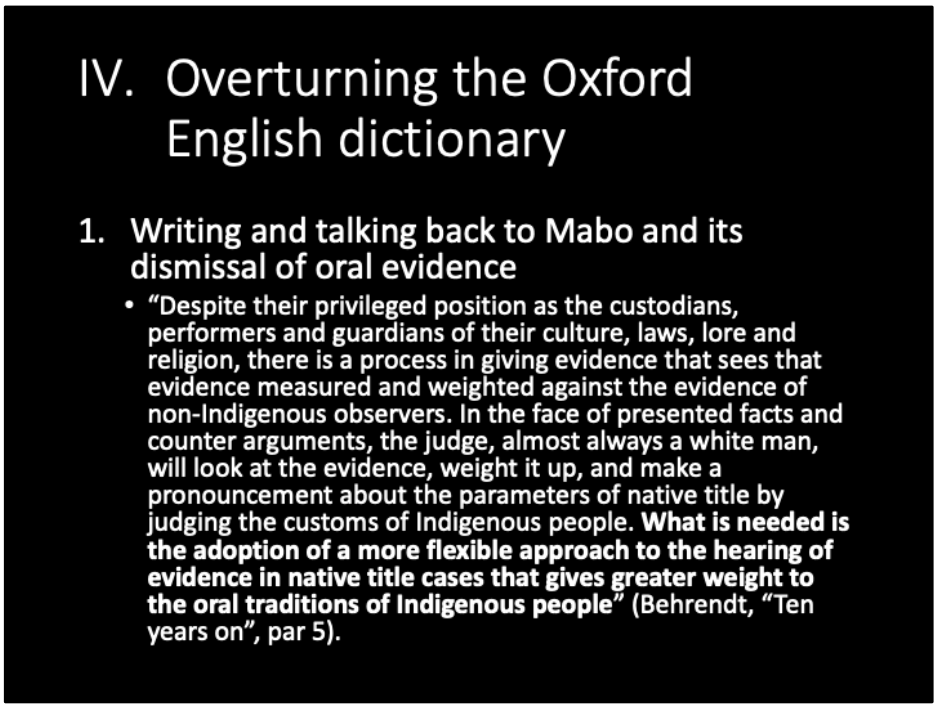
sovereignty” 175).



Through its description of the mining lobby, the novel makes visible how whiteness operates discursively through a binary between Indigenous rights that are depicted as special and white interests that are not presented as such, but as the common good, as general interests. *The Yield*'s plot and its distribution of characters reflect that "Native title claimants are positioned as making illegitimate claims and as a threat to industry and the interests of the nation; such a positioning reinscribes White ownership of the nation" (Moreton-Robinson, "Witnessing whiteness" 13).

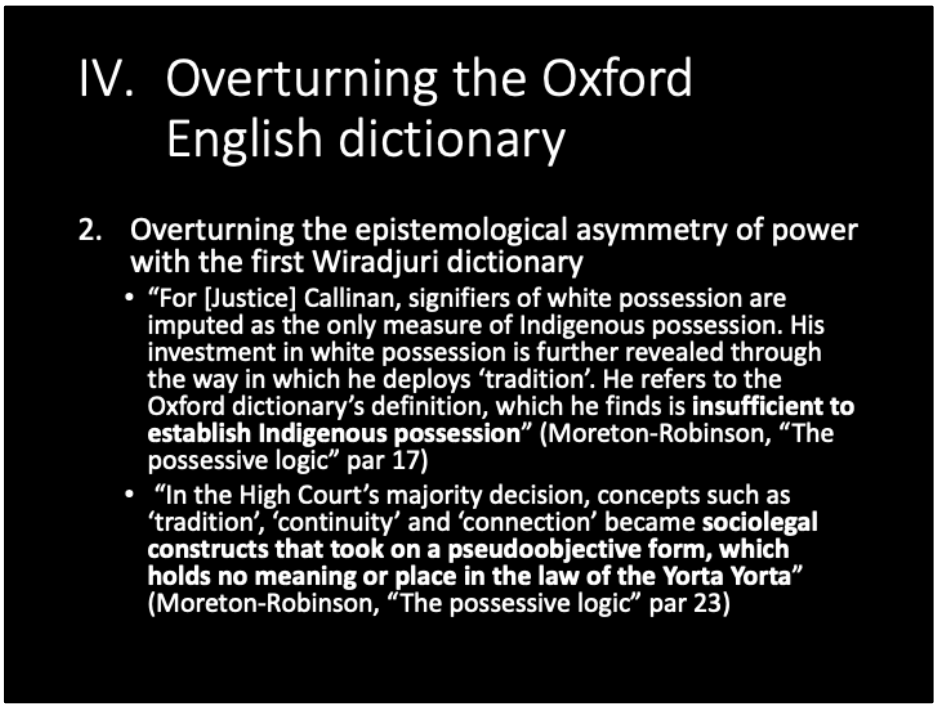


By using Native Title as a disillusion for its Indigenous main character, the post-Mabo indigenous bildungsroman exposes that the Mabo decision offers a recognition of the right for Indigenous people to claim their lands, but only on white terms. As Moreton-Robinson argues, Mabo is disappointing because it continues to center whiteness by dismissing Indigenous conceptualisations of their sovereignty: "The recognition by the White High Court of our right to make claims to our land was won playing by White rules, in Mabo and subsequently in Wik […]. Confirmation of the Indigenous presence in the landscape is dependent on the words of White people. Whiteness is centred by setting the criteria for proof and the standards for credibility." (Moreton-Robinson "Witnessing whiteness" 12). The young Wiradjuri character lives in a world where her land rights are not defined in Indigenous terms, but understood as Native Title within a white legal system.

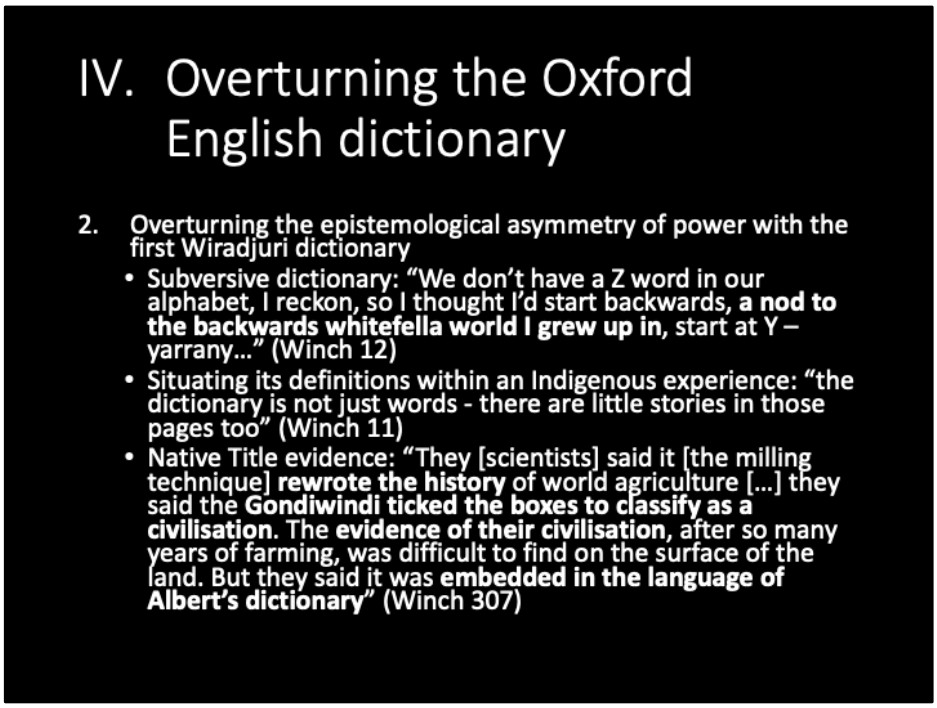


Since the Mabo case, native titles are "defined by the laws and customs of Indigenous people" (Behrendt, "Ten years on", par 5). But how the concepts of law and custom are understood and their subsequent evaluation remain in the hands of predominantly white people. Not only do Indigenous people have the burden of the proof, which is a long and costly process, but they have to submit them to courts that are predominantly non-Indigenous following their own criteria. As a consequence, some important proofs are dismissed, under the pretense that they are oral. Behrendt argues that the legal system will remain unfair to Indigenous people until oral proofs are accepted. With its plot revolving around oral transmission and the written word, *The Yield* echoes those concerns with Native Title and its privileging of written proofs over oral ones as a result of its white conceptualisation. As a consequence of this limited and limiting definition of Indigenous land rights, Winch's main character develops a post-colonial literary counter-strategy. August's quest to stop the mine unfolds in parallel to her quest to find the book that her grand-father was writing when he died, as she intuitively feels that it could help her; Albert's literary project, continued by his grand-daughter August, operates as a Native Title evidence. But Albert's dictionary isn't just a proof destined to a white court. It is a living testimony of the survival of the "old language" (306), transmitted as such to the younger generations. Albert's literary project embeds an important oral dimension.

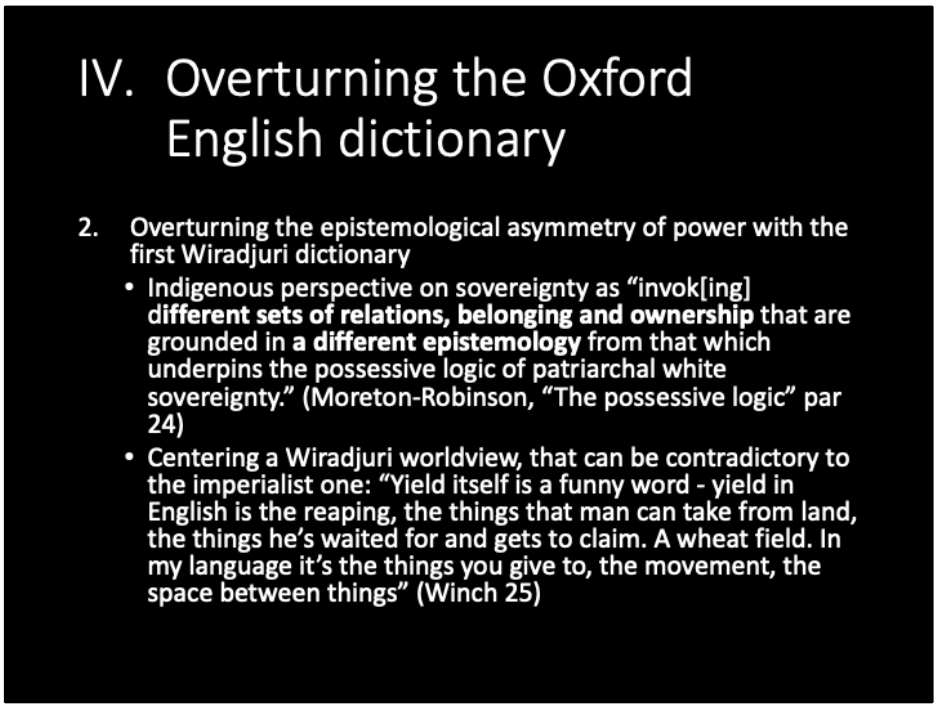
Albert's Wiradjuri dictionary writes back but also talks back to Mabo and its dismissal of oral evidence, by including many instructions on how to pronounce words.



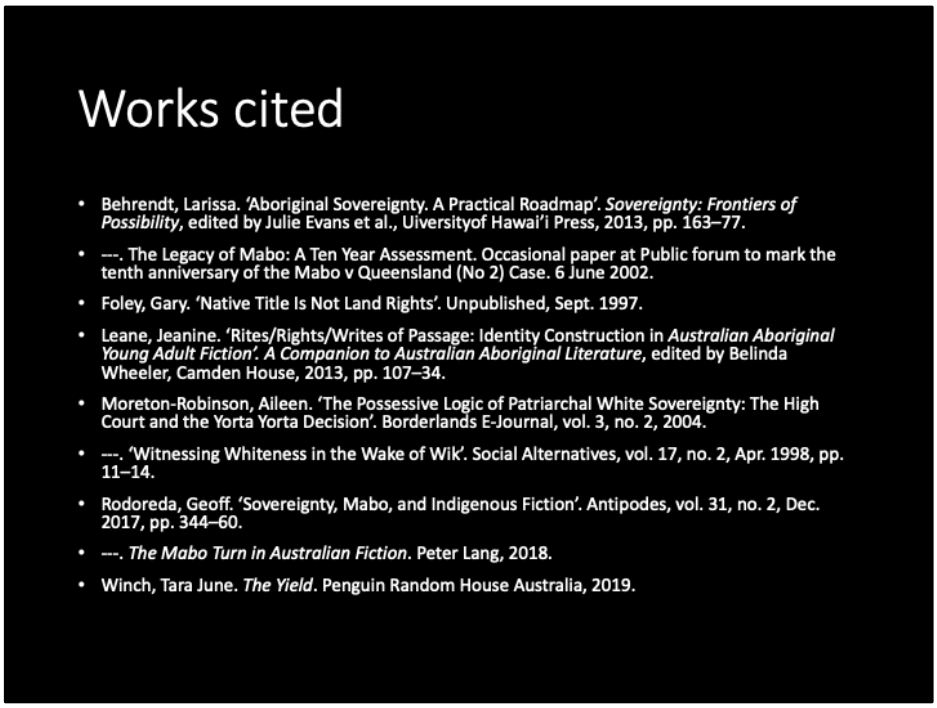
In an article using critical race theory to demonstrate the racialisation of law in Australia, Moreton-Robinson shows how the definition of words has an impact on Indigenous rights (Moreton-Robinson, "The possessive logic"). Moreton-Robinson demonstrates that the power of definition can serve to further dispossess a racialised minority (Moreton-Robinson, "The possessive logic" par 13 and 17). She illustrates this epistemological asymmetry of power with the Wik case where one judge referred to the Oxford dictionary's definition of "tradition". Moreton-Robinson argues that even if the Oxford English Dictionary is presented as a neutral institution setting universal norms, its definitions do not give account of Indigenous worldviews: "In the High Court's majority decision, concepts such as 'tradition', 'continuity 'and 'connection 'became sociolegal constructs that took on a pseudoobjective form, which holds no meaning or place in the law of the Yorta Yorta" (Moreton-Robinson, "The possessive logic" par 23). By resorting to the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the term "tradition", justice Callinan dismissed the Yorta Yorta's claim under the pretense that their traditions couldn't possibly have continued to the present time, thus dismissing the fact that they adapted their traditions in order to survive. This static and backward-looking understanding of tradition is congruent with a white vision on Aboriginality, but not with an Indigenous perspective of sovereignty where the body itself carries an inalienable relationship to land.



With its work on the genre of the dictionary and its overt irony towards the Oxford English Dictionary, *The Yield* precisely exposes the epistemological relations of power and the falseness of such pretensions to universalism. While admitting being inspired by the Western tradition of dictionaries, Albert treats with irony their apparent apolitical style. Subverting the English dictionary, Albert writes back to the literary institution by adopting a de-centered perspective. He frames his literary project in a subversive manner, centering his experience as an Indigenous person marginalised in Australia. Albert's definitions are not conventional, or at least not aligned with the Western tradition of dictionaries: they are personal, located in his own experience and thus they bear witness to an other worldview and contain the proof of other knowledges. Because Albert uses the genre of the dictionary in a subversive way, narrating stories that contain ancestral knowledge, he didn't only record a wordlist demonstrating the continuous existence of the Wiradjuri language but also proved that the Gondiwindi were present on this land prior to colonisation.



The literary project undertaken by Albert responds to the disqualification of oral proofs in decisions such as the Wik case. Its location in a Wiradjuri worldview however asserts Indigenous sovereignty in its own terms, where, as Moreton-Robinson puts it, "[it] invokes different sets of relations, belonging and ownership that are grounded in a different epistemology from that which underpins the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty." (Moreton-Robinson, "The possessive logic" par 24). Talking back to the Oxford English Dictionary with his Wiradjuri dictionary, Albert centers an Indigenous worldview where the definition of words might be in contradiction with white conceptualisations, as illustrated by the entry word "Yield". The concept of Yield exemplifies the reciprocal, embodied and inalienable relationship to land that marks Indigenous sovereignty, as opposed to the exploitation of the environment that defines white possession.



With a plot revolving around land ownership and possession, *The Yield* features a youngish Wiradjuri main character who feels and acts sovereign although she is dispossessed in the colonized space of the novel. Setting on a custodianship quest to save her ancestral land from tin mining, she soon faces a political disillusion with the process of Native Title. Far from its common image in the non-Indigenous majority, Native Title appears as an obstacle because of the burden of the proof weighing on her family. This negative perspective on Native Title echoes the disappointment of some Indigenous thinkers and confronts the non-Indigenous readership who might be too quick to see Mabo as unequivocally beneficial to Indigenous people. By depicting a town where Indigenous dispossession attracts little sympathy and Indigenous land rights are perceived as threatening and competing with white interests that are presented as general, Winch illustrates how a psychological terra nullius persists even after Mabo. However, in another worldview such as Albert's, Indigenous sovereignty isn't divisive or unAustralian, but it is embodied and inalienable. *The Yield* thus writes back to Mabo by exposing the inadequacies of Native Title, but also by showing what sovereignty means beyond white definitions of Native Title. *The Yield* de-centers whiteness from both the law and literature, by making visible that white pretensions to universalism, objectivity and neutrality are falsehoods permitted by an epistemological asymmetry of power. As a sovereignty bildungsroman, it decolonizes

both discourses on native titles and the genres of the dictionary and of young adult fiction, by adopting an Indigenous perspective.