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## Provincializing the Western literary canon

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# Provincializing the Western literary canon

Intertextuality as intellectual sovereignty in  
*After Story* by Larissa Behrendt

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With special thanks to Temiti LEHARTEL



## Intellectual sovereignty in *After Story* by Larissa Behrendt

“As Teresia Teaiwa says, ‘engaging broadly with theory and theorists of all kinds is part of exercising intellectual agency and is a necessary foundation for achieving fuller self-determination for Native and Indigenous and Pacific peoples in the academy.’ She goes on to argue that ‘Sovereign intellectuals have nothing to lose by admitting that some white men, white women, and white people are part of our genealogies of thinking whether we like it or not. Some white men, white women, white people are the ancestors we get to choose. The challenge for centuries has been the absence of the sovereignty to choose Native and Indigenous scholars writing about Indigenous matters while drawing on indigenous knowledge, languages and values.’

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p. 43

Citing Teresia Teaiwa, “The ancestors we get to choose”, in *Theorizing Native studies*, 2014, p. 43-45)

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines intellectual sovereignty as an ability to choose one’s own genealogy of thought. However, she stresses that “The challenge for centuries has been the absence of the sovereignty to choose Native and Indigenous scholars writing about Indigenous matters while drawing on indigenous knowledge, languages and values (Tuhiwai Smith, p. 43).”

Intellectual sovereignty is indeed a difficult task to achieve in postcolonizing societies, by which Aileen Moreton-Robinson defines settler colonies such as Australia where power relationships persist through to today (“I still call Australia home”, p. 10). Indeed, the colonial construction of others as inferiors has an epistemological dimension. As a consequence, Moreton-Robinson explains that First Nations peoples have been constructed as unseeing, not knowing.

This paper argues that the novel *After Story*, published in 2021 by Eualeyai and Kamillaroi writer Larissa Behrendt, practices intellectual sovereignty by entering in a critical relationship with the Western literary canon and, at the same time, centering First Nations’ knowledges and storytellers.

The novel does so by using intertextuality, which is a relational literary device. Intertextuality indeed describes how a text enters in a relationship with other texts (see for example Genette, *Palimpsests*, 1992, p. 1-2). In *After Story*, intertextuality operationalises a plural, and indeed decolonial, genealogy of thought.

Engaging in a critical and anti-colonial relationship with the Western canon has the effect of “provincializing” it. I borrow this concept of “provincializing” to Dipesh Chakrabarty, which he uses to describe the process of situating Western ideas in Europe. By defying their claims to universalism, we can understand that there have been and there are presently other ways of being in the world.

## Provincializing the Western literary canon

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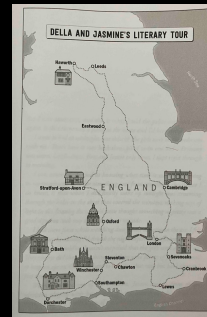
I will first demonstrate how this critical relationship with the Western canon has the effect of provincializing it, challenging Western claims to universalism. I will then show that the marginalization of First Nations characters denounces post colonizing relationships and particularly their epistemological dimension. I will finally explain how the novel centers First Nations knowledges by casting characters who are empowered by a Elder and become writers.

*After Story* is a realist novel told in a diary style alternatively by a mother, Della, and one of her daughters, Jazzie / Jasmine. It follows the two Indigenous Australian women over a dozen days as they go on a literary tour in England, following the footsteps of famous British authors such as Shakespeare, Carrol, Woolf, Austen and the Brontës. Intertextuality is at the heart of the plot, with both characters commenting on the literary works, but also the living conditions of the authors and the institutions supporting them such as museums, libraries and universities. As both the tour and the novel come to an end, mother and daughter decide to take the pen together in order to compile their own ancestral oral stories and pass them on to future

generations.

## I. Provincializing Europe, against universalism

### 1. Localizing thoughts with the travel diary



Frontispiece of  
*After story*

As a literary travel diary, *After Story* makes visible the very places where Western masterpieces have been written, where the manuscripts are kept and where the works are taught as if they were valid for the whole humanity. By actualizing the link between thoughts and places, the novel challenges Western claims to universalism.

A consequence of Western claims to universalism, an “asymmetry of ignorance” (I borrow from Chakrabarty) weighs on the characters. It is expected of Della and Jasmine that they know the English canon, or, at least, that they show a desire to know about it. This marginalizes Della, who has quit school early. She nevertheless resists this marginalization with a strong sense of humour and irony, commenting on her strategy of nodding (p. 42) or on Proust whom she deems stupid (p. 157).

While there is an imperative for everyone to know the English canon because of its presumed universal value, there is, on the other hand, a common ignorance of, and disinterest in, Della and Jasmine’s culture. As a result, Della generally keeps her stories to herself (and the reader), as the other non-Indigenous characters don’t consider her knowledgeable, apart from the tour guide Lionel. She is even humiliated by other characters for her ancestral knowledge, for example when she defends hunting. Celia, a white woman

characters, deems her perspective “ridiculous”. However, internal focalization gives the reader access to Della’s argumentation in favor of a respectful practice that has regulated the ecosystem for millennia (p. 90). Della’s marginalization as a knower in the text appears metonymic of the disqualification of First Nations knowledges.



1. Provincializing Europe, against universalism

2. Debunking the colonial hierarchy of cultures

“He [Professor Finn] said: ‘No other culture produced a Shakespeare.’ And I thought, well, **no other culture produced an Aunty Elaine.** [...] And if a civilization can sustain itself for over sixty-five thousand years like my mother’s, **why do you assume that you have nothing to learn from it** about how it keeps the peace and keeps on going? **The whole ranking one over another seems like a nonsense.**”

(p. 233).

As Della and Jasmine visit England’s top literary places, they are confronted with the belief in the superiority of the English culture. It is the conclusion of Professor Finn, a pedantic white patriarchal co-traveller, considers Shakespeare as the essence of literature. In a internal comment, Della exposes Finn’s ignorance by comparing Aunty Elaine to Shakespeare. Claiming the extraordinary longevity of her civilization, she goes on to expose the colonial hierarchization of cultures, peoples and languages as a fallacy:

He [Professor Finn] said: “No other culture produced a Shakespeare.” And I thought, well, no other culture produced an Aunty Elaine. [...] And if a civilization can sustain itself for over sixty-five thousand years like my mother’s, why do you assume that you have nothing to learn from it about how it keeps the peace and keeps on going? The whole ranking one over another seems like a nonsense (p. 233).

1. Provincializing Europe, against universalism

2. Debunking the colonial hierarchy of cultures

“Within the walls of the university, I’d left the wisdom of Aunty Elaine at the door, content to accept the way Western knowledge works as the only thing that mattered (p. 219)”.

“The books I read, the education and university training I received, all shaped who I was and how I saw the world. Even though I’d let that education bury Aunty Elaine’s stories and knowledge, they were still here, in my memory and Mum’s, waiting for us to unearth them (p. 288).”

On her side, Jasmine regrets that First Nations’ knowledges are discredited and therefore excluded from institutions: “Within the walls of the university, I’d left the wisdom of Aunty Elaine at the door, content to accept the way Western knowledge works as the only thing that mattered (p. 219)”.

She reflects on how she feels shaped by both her ancestral knowledge and her Western university training. She asserts that her Indigenous ontology remains irreducible, even if her ancestral knowledge is invisibilized in white cultural domains:

The books I read, the education and university training I received, all shaped who I was and how I saw the world. Even though I’d let that education bury Aunty Elaine’s stories and knowledge, they were still here, in my memory and Mum’s, waiting for us to unearth them (p. 288).

## II. Pluralizing ways of being / knowing / feeling / telling / writing...

### 1.(Re)telling First Nations counter-narratives on the invasion

- Violence of the colonization process: introduced diseases (p. 43);
- Longevity: a forty thousand years civilization (p. 95)
- Against the colonial construction of differences (as pre-modern): Della's ancestors' fish traps (p. 155)
- Against the legend of a pacific invasion: celebrating First Nations' "warriors", "heroes"

The characters enter in relationship with the Western canon from their standpoints as Indigenous women. For example, the literary places that Della visits bring up memories of invasion narratives told by Aunty Elaine. As a result, the novel interweaves the present with the past, it tells the story of the literary tour in England as well as it (re)tells the history of the invasion of Australia through the Indigenous perspective of Aunty Elaine. As such, these histories are counter-narratives because they highlight the violence of the colonization process, the resistance opposed by First Nations to their dispossession, and the fallacy of its justification in the name of civilization. Paradoxically, the visit to the imperial center provides opportunities to share a First Nations' perspective on colonialism. For example, when visiting London and hearing about the plague, Della reflects on introduced diseases in the Indigenous communities around Sydney (p. 43). As she visits a house dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, she reclaims the longevity of her forty thousand years civilization (p. 95). Comparing "ancient" druid stones with her ancestors' fish traps (p. 155), she exposes the fallacy of the ideology that has constructed her people as pre-modern or "backwards" (p. 155). "Through an analogy between Oxford's religious martyrs with Indigenous "warriors", who "were heroes really", Della fights against the narrative of a pacific colonization (p.

208–209)".

## II. Pluralizing ways of being / knowing / feeling / telling / writing...

### 1.(Re)telling First Nations counter-narratives on the invasion

“Aunty Elaine would remind me [Jasmine] that **there is more than one way to tell a story**; there can sometimes be more than one truth. ‘The silences are as important as the words,’ she’d often say. There is **what’s not in the archive, not in the history books** – those things that have been excluded, hidden, overlooked.”

(p. 217).

On her side, Jasmine reflects on who writes history and how - questions that are emblematic of both postcolonial theory (Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community”, p. IX) and decolonial thinking (Tlostanova and Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn*, p. 35). Her comments expose the partiality of knowledge and the necessity to hear First Nations counter-hegemonic accounts:

Aunty Elaine would remind me [Jasmine] that there is more than one way to tell a story; there can sometimes be more than one truth. “The silences are as important as the words,” she’d often say. There is what’s not in the archive, not in the history books – those things that have been excluded, hidden, overlooked (Behrendt, 2021, p. 217).

There is a complex layering of intertextuality in *After Story*: at the first level, the present of the novel, the text enter in a critical relationship with the Western canon. But visiting literary places also triggers memories of stories of the invasion told by an Elder. This adds another layer of intertextuality, with the texts engaging in a relationship with oral narratives of the invasion, from the perspective of First Nations. As such, Aunty Elaine’s knowledge is not

limited to cultural stories, but encompasses counter-hegemonic perspectives on invasion and survival strategies.

## II. Pluralizing ways of being / knowing / feeling / telling / writing...

### 2. Racialized characters becoming writers from the borders

"I usually feel like I don't know much that will help anyone [...] I'd never had the feeling that what I knew was something other people were interested in (p. 184)".

"I decided that I would write in my book. And for the first time, I didn't write of the dodo or Alice's Adventures in Wonderland or the martyrs but I started to write the story I had told Meredith yesterday, the one about the owl who didn't look after the children. [...] Even **though it wasn't something I saw on the trip, it was something I thought about** (p. 209)".

As First Nations' characters developing in a post colonizing society, Della and Jasmine both share an experience of being racialized and marginalized. This is particularly true for Della in the present of the literary tour, because of her lack of education in the Western school system. As a consequence of her marginalisation, Della expresses doubts about herself as a knower: "I usually feel like I don't know much that will help anyone [...] I'd never had the feeling that what I knew was something other people were interested in (p. 184)". The novel nevertheless unfolds as the story of how she becomes a writer. At first Della only takes short notes of what she learns from the tour guide. Her memories of Aunty Elaine's invasion narratives remain internal comments. Until one day, after Meredith questioned her about what she calls "Dreamtime stories", she feels the need to write down the story of the night owl (p. 182–184).

Inspired by the literary tour in an indirect way, Della decides to consign in written her own stories: "I decided that I would write in my book. And for the first time, I didn't write of the dodo or Alice's Adventures in Wonderland or the martyrs but I started to write the story I had told Meredith yesterday, the one

about the owl who didn't look after the children. [...] Even though it wasn't something I saw on the trip, it was something I thought about (p. 209)".

Borrowing from Tlostanova and Mignolo's concept of « border thinking » (*Learning to Unlearn*, p. 62-3; see also p. 19 ), my colleague Temiti Lehartel and myself would like to propose that these characters be called "writers from the border". Writing from the border is a position from which the characters share the marginality and racialization imposed by post colonizing relationships or, in other words, how they have been constructed as "Others", unseeing and not knowing. And yet, at the same time, they also center their own perspectives, ways of being, of knowing, and of telling.

Della and Jasmine's literary tour therefore has a paradoxical outcome with both characters becoming writers from the borders: their trip to England doesn't enforce any imperial idolatry for white authors but it inspires them to claim epistemic equity by putting their ancestral stories into writing.



### III. Centering First Nations as knowers / storytellers / writers

#### 1. Centering First Nations knowledges

"I wasn't very good at school, always found it hard to concentrate, but I could listen to Aunty Elaine for hours because what she said made sense (p. 43)".

Aunty Elaine is "the wisest (p. 11)" and "the most senior woman in town (p. 220)".

"They [their ancestors] could read the land the way Jazzie reads a book (Behrendt, p. 45)".

"She saw meanings everywhere, like reading a book (p. 152)".

Della and Jasmine are not only racialized / marginalized, but they are also centered as First Nations subjects possessing and producing knowledges. This centration is located / positioned / situated in an alternative genealogy of thought where a First Nations Elder takes a place of honor. The importance of Aunty Elaine's knowledge is highlighted by superlatives that impose her as an authority figure: she is described as "the wisest (p. 11)" and "the most senior woman in town (p. 220)". Ironically, Della deems Aunty Elaine's knowledge relevant, compared to school: "I wasn't very good at school, always found it hard to concentrate, but I could listen to Aunty Elaine for hours because what she said made sense (p. 43)". This is because Aunty Elaine's knowledge is embodied, in an inalienable relation with the land: "They [their ancestors] could read the land the way Jazzie reads a book (p. 45)". The novel draws an epistemic model where the figure of authority is embodied by a character who has been subjected to racism and the colonial construction of differences. As a knowledgeable Elder, Aunty Elaine plays an empowering role for the characters who become writers.

### III. Centering First Nations as knowers / storytellers / writers

#### 2. Warning non-Indigenous readers against an anthropological gaze

“In the awakening of this **sense of anachronism** lies the beginning of modern historical consciousness. Indeed, anachronism is regarded as the hallmark of such a consciousness; historical evidence (the archive) is produced by **our capacity to see something that is contemporaneous with us** - ranging from practices, humans, institutions, and stone-inscriptions to documents - **as a relic of another time or place** (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing*, p. 238-9).”

Paradoxically inspired by their literary tour in England, the two First Nations women characters decide to take the pen to write the stories that have been passed on to them by Aunty Elaine. However, the novel shows that there is a risk that the characters' literary project could be misinterpreted by non-Indigenous readers. This misinterpretation risk consists in objectifying First Nations' cultures by seeing them as belonging to a dead past. As Chakrabarty explains, the modern consciousness, with its belief that history follows a singular development, has a tendency to view non-Western cultures and peoples with a sense of anachronism.

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### III. Centering First Nations as knowers / storytellers / writers

#### 2. Warning non-Indigenous readers against an anthropological gaze

“When Aunty Elaine would talk about it, our culture felt alive – the sewing of possum cloaks, the knots of weaving, the sweeping brush stroke of painting, the gift of telling stories. They were living and breathing, not relics of the past, frozen in time (p. 218)”.

“I was pleased for Meredith’s interest in things about my culture but to be honest it was also a bit exhausting and I needed a break from her and her questions. [...]

I can see why Aunty Elaine didn’t like the word ‘Dreamtime’ for our stories as though it was something that was make-believe. These ‘cultural stories’ as she would call them, always had a little message, a meaning, that explained the world around you, what values you should live by. It’s not just a thing for the past but describes the world today.” (p. 212–213)

In the novel, Meredith is a white woman representing this modern consciousness, marked by an historicist and ethnographic gaze that has “the capacity to see the past as gone and reified into an object of investigation” (*Provincializing*, p. 243). One of the rare characters to demonstrate interest in Della’s knowledge, Meredith nevertheless qualifies her stories as “Dreamtime”. The labelling upsets Della, who recalls that Aunty Elaine preferred to call them « cultural ». Indeed, they regret that their stories are too often labeled as “dreams”, as if they were mere fictions from the past, when they actually are part of a surviving complex social organization. Meredith therefore plays figuratively the role of a counter-reader in the text. The novel indeed rather invites its non-Indigenous readers to pluralize the present. By rejecting an ethnographic reception of her stories, Della indicates how she wants them to be understood: as other ways of presently being in the world, other “wordlings”: “When Aunty Elaine would talk about it, our culture felt alive – the sewing of possum cloaks, the knots of weaving, the sweeping brush stroke of painting, the gift of telling stories. They were living and breathing, not relics of the past, frozen in time (p. 218)”.

In addition to this objectification caused by a sense of anachronism, Meredith

re-inscribes power relationships by subjecting Della to a draining interrogatory. The scene is ambivalent, because Meredith's interest in Della's culture is cast as exploitative. Their dialogue reminds of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's comments in *Decolonizing methodologies* on how anthropology has oppressed Indigenous peoples, making them distrustful of research (p. 49):

Meredith's benevolent yet anthropological gaze prompts Della to reflect on the reception of her stories and to clarify what a decolonial reading contract could look like:

I was pleased for Meredith's interest in things about my culture but to be honest it was also a bit exhausting and I needed a break from her and her questions. [...]

I can see why Aunty Elaine didn't like the word "Dreamtime" for our stories as though it was something that was make-believe. These "cultural stories" as she would call them, always had a little message, a meaning, that explained the word around you, what values you should live by. It's not just a thing for the past but describes the world today (p. 212–213).

### III. Centering First Nations as knowers / storytellers / writers

#### 3. Consigning an Elder's knowledge and language for their community

- "In Indigenous cultural domains, **relationality** means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; it is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and **social memory** (Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the white woman*, p. 16)."
- "**The most important relationships for Aboriginal women in their narratives are with either their surrogate or extended families.** [...] Aboriginal women's relationality is based on giving priority to personal relations based on principles of generosity, empathy and care which connote ideals of respect, consideration, understanding, politeness and nurturing (Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "When the object speaks", p. 279).

Della and Jasmine define their literary project in opposition to Meredith's anthropological consumption of First Nations' stories. First of all, it is a collective and collaborative project involving multiple generations, illustrating the importance of relationality. Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains that relationality is constitutive of Indigenous subjectivity and defines an ethics: In Indigenous cultural domains, relationality means that one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; it is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, coexistence, cooperation and social memory (*Talkin' up to the white woman*, p. 16).

Moreton-Robinson shows that relationality is expressed in Indigenous women's life stories through the importance of family: The most important relationships for Aboriginal women in their narratives are with either their surrogate or extended families. [...] Aboriginal women's relationality is based on giving priority to personal relations based on principles of generosity, empathy and care which connote ideals of respect, consideration, understanding, politeness and nurturing ("When the object speaks", p. 279).

### III. Centering First Nations as knowers / storytellers / writers

#### 3. Consigning an Elder's knowledge and language for their community

"I worry one day we will forget them [Aunty Elaine's stories] and they'll all be lost. Why don't we write it all down? The stories, the bits of wisdom, even her little sayings, everything we can remember. [...] Capture the things we all remember; and keep them for the kids." (p. 288)

"I [Jasmine] realized that at that moment on Hampstead Heath when Mum had told me the story of the butterfly, I'd gotten all I'd wanted from the trip. Aunty Elaine's story had woven Mum and I closer and would keep weaving us all together – Mum, Aunt Kiki, Leigh-Anne, Kylie and me. She had said I would come home and I now realised that she didn't mean back to town but back to my family and the stories we held." (p. 291–292)

Relationality in *After Story* challenges Western notions of authorship. Relationality is represented by the metaphor of the weaving:

I [Jasmine] realized that at that moment on Hampstead Heath when Mum had told me the story of the butterfly, I'd gotten all I'd wanted from the trip. Aunty Elaine's story had woven Mum and I closer and would keep weaving us all together – Mum, Aunt Kiki, Leigh-Anne, Kylie and me. She had said I would come home and I now realised that she didn't mean back to town but back to my family and the stories we held (p. 291–292).

At the other end of the communication, Della and Jasmine imagine their readership as being primarily their community and particularly the future generations : "I worry one day we will forget them [Aunty Elaine's stories] and they'll all be lost. Why don't we write it all down? The stories, the bits of wisdom, even her little sayings, everything we can remember. [...] Capture the things we all remember; and keep them for the kids (p. 288)".

## Conclusion

- Intellectual sovereignty = engagement with a plural genealogy of thought:
  - With the English canon in a spirit of “anti-colonial” gratitude” (Chakrabarty, p. 255)
  - With First Nations’ knowledges
- Centering on First Nations as subjects producing valid knowledges and as storytellers becoming writers (yet marginalized)
- Intertextuality embedded in relationality

*After Story* exercises its intellectual sovereignty by choosing a plural literary genealogy, interweaving white English writers with First Nations storytellers. The English canon is often referred to with irony, in a spirit of what Chakrabarty calls « anti-colonial gratitude » (*Provincializing*, p. 255). In any case, the form of the literary tour, with the characters literally traveling to the places constituting the Western genealogy of thought, actualizes the link between thought and places. The English canon is referred to in a way that provincializes it, challenging its claims to universalism. At the same time as engaging critically with the Western canon, the novel enters in relationship with First Nations’ knowledges, claiming their validity in a strong decolonial stance.

First Nations peoples are centered in the novel, with characters described as subjects producing knowledge and as storytellers who become writers, despite them having been and still being marginalized.

Therefore, relationality is not only thematized in the text, when the characters define their literary project as collaborative, collective and community-oriented. Relationality is also a practice in the text operationalized through the literary device of intertextuality, which defines relationships between texts. By centering on First Nations and inscribing intertextuality in Indigenous’

relationality, *After Story* provincializes the Western English canon and pluralizes the present, celebrating First Nations cultures as alive and thriving.



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