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## **Decolonial Metatextualities: Strategies of Resistance in Three Contemporary Novels of Oceania**

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### **Abstract**

Decolonial thinkers have stressed that to decolonise is not to reject the colonial legacy, but to deal with it, and to centre First Nations' perspectives in its critique and in decolonising knowledge. As a critical relationship of a text – with itself, other texts, literature, and culture – metatextuality is a literary device operationalized in contemporary novels to resist persisting colonial powers. In this paper, we present three works of fiction by Indigenous writers of Oceania, and analyse their political use of metatextuality: *L'île des rêves écrasés* (*Island of Shattered Dreams*), by Tahitian author Chantal Spitz (1991); *The Yield*, by Aboriginal Wiradjuri novelist Tara June Winch (2019); and *After Story*, by Aboriginal Eualeyai/Kamillaroï writer Larissa Behrendt (2021). Centred on First Nations' characters from Tahiti and Australia, these novels expose how they are racialised, marginalised, and constructed as inferior in postcolonising societies; and how, at the same time, these Indigenous characters are legitimate knowers and storytellers, reflecting on Western literature (often ironically), on their own marginality, and on their ancestral knowledges and languages. Borrowing from decolonial theorists Tlostanova and Mignolo's (2012) 'border thinking', we propose that these novels deploy a 'writing from the border'.

**Keywords:** decolonial, postcolonising, comparative literature, metafiction, First Nations, Aboriginal, Indigenous, intertextuality, reflexivity, Oceania

## Introduction: Decolonial Metatextualities

The term “post-colonial” (with a dash) has been used “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to *the present day*” (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 2, our emphasis). Postcolonial theory unveils how colonisers created their own imaginary of the ‘Other’, and used local cultural knowledge to subjugate the subaltern under their empires. Informed by European critical theories, postcolonialism nevertheless has engaged subaltern voices in showing ways the *Empire writes back* (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Decolonial theories strive to move beyond the postcolonial to focus on Indigenous theories and perspectives as they arise from specific encounters with colonialism(s) from specific regions of the world – so many of which lie in the tropics. The theory of decoloniality first arose out of the Latin America experience, but in this paper, we also call on theorists from Oceania, specifically, Australia and the South Pacific.

Critical of postcolonial theory for its focus on migration and overlooking the experience and ontology of Australian Indigenous peoples, Aileen Moreton-Robinson prefers the adjective “postcolonizing” to account for the persisting effects of settlement colonialism:

It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of *ongoing process*, which that implies. (2010, p. 10, our emphasis)

One of the epistemological effects of postcolonising relationships is the disqualification of Indigenous peoples as knowers, as Moreton-Robinson (1998, p. 281) explains:

In White cultural domains Aboriginal women became subjects to be taught while White women and men assumed the role of the knowing subject. Aboriginal people were treated as though they had no knowledge, feelings or emotional attachments and were perceived as being *tabula rasa*.

This epistemological disqualification of colonised peoples is part of the colonial dehumanising process, and it continues to underlie neocolonial discourses. Writing from the South Pacific, Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes this practice of dehumanisation:

One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the “arts”

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of civilization. By lacking such virtues, we disqualified ourselves, not just from civilization but from humanity itself. (1999/2021, p. 28)

Moreton-Robinson and Tuhiwai Smith's comments on the subjugation of Indigenous knowledges, specific to the peoples of Oceania, echo the concept of "coloniality of knowledge". Following Anibal Quijano (2012), who coined the term "coloniality", and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, who has addressed its ontological dimension as the coloniality of being (2007, p. 252), Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo (2012, p. 7-8) define coloniality as:

a model of power relations that came into existence as a consequence of the Western imperial expansion but did not end with the official end of colonialism and colonial administrations. It survives in culture, labor, intersubjective relations, knowledge production, books, cultural patterns, and other aspects of modern existence.

The concept of coloniality of knowledge seeks to address the epistemological dimension of the colonial relations of power. One of the consequences of this power relation has been the disqualification of Indigenous peoples as agents producing critical theories (Grossman, 2003), research (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999/2021) and literature, and where tokenism allows for the recuperation of only a few works, while invisibilising most. Thus, decoloniality of knowledge seeks to address and redress the ongoing power relations seeped in colonialism, through contemporary Indigenous theories and practices.

The three literary works discussed in this paper are practices of decoloniality. Each novel features Indigenous characters who themselves become writers. We will argue that by thematising racialised peoples claiming their rights as knowers and storytellers, these novels resist the coloniality of knowledge or, in other words, the epistemological dimension of postcolonialising relationships. We undertake our analysis through an engagement with the notion of decolonial metatextuality, looking at the Indigenous characters' texts, within the three Indigenous writer's novels.

### **Three Novels from Oceania: Metatextual and Decolonial Stories**

*L'île des rêves écrasés* by Indigenous Tahitian writer Chantal T. Spitz, published in 1991 and translated into English as *Island of Shattered Dreams* in 2007, tells the story of a Mā'ohi (Tahitian) family over three generations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel centres on the creation of a French nuclear base on the island called Ruahine and the consequences for its inhabitants, with the Mā'ohi family being expropriated from its motu Maeva (ancestral land). The story contains many levels with each character becoming at some point a narrator – or, as the main narrator calls them, "parolier/ière" (lyricists) – thus hybridizing the novel with poetry and orality. The main metatextual

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dimension of the work is the pursuit of a literary project by Tetiare, a third-generation character, to regain her family and people's dream by "writing the story of country and people, their history" (Spitz, 1991, p. 146, 181-182). This book inside the book remains at its horizon. Both books finish at the same time, with the character Tetiare picking up writing again after a long ellipse, to finish her book as the novel closes.

*The Yield* by Aboriginal-Wiradjuri writer Tara June Winch, published in 2019 and translated into French as *La Récolte* in 2020, is a fiction elaborating its plot around the Wiradjuri language dictionary. Returning to her ancestral land in Prosperous for the burial of her grandfather Albert Gondiwindi, the granddaughter August Gondiwindi discovers that her family is about to be expropriated from their lands by a tin mine, and she sets out on a quest to stop it. She eventually finds the book that Albert was working on, a list of words in their old language – which as a member of the Stolen Generations<sup>1</sup> he was forbidden to speak in the mission – that will allow her and her mob<sup>2</sup> to claim Native Title. The novel switches between three types of text: Albert's list of Wiradjuri words explained in English through stories and memories; August's story told in a realist style; and the serialised letter from the Lutheran Reverend who during colonial times founded the Mission on her mob's ancestral land.

The novel *After Story*, is told in a diary style alternatively by the mother, Della, and her daughter, Jazzie/Jasmine. *After Story* was published in 2021 by Australian Euleyai and Kamillaroi writer Larissa Behrendt. It follows the two Indigenous Australian women over a dozen days as they go on a literary tour in England, walking in the footsteps of famous British authors such as Shakespeare, Carrol, Woolf, Austen and the Brontës. Intertextuality is at the heart of the plot, with the two characters commenting on the literary works, the living conditions of the authors, and the institutions that support their memories and writings such as museums, libraries and universities. As the literary tour and the novel come to an end, mother and daughter decide to take up the pen together in order to compile their own ancestral oral stories and pass them on to future generations.

Because their plots revolve entirely or partly around characters becoming writers, all three novels have a strong "metatextual" dimension. A literary device, metatextuality encompasses all reflections in a text about itself, other texts, literature, or culture generally. As such, metatextuality describes the commentary and critical relationships of a text with other texts (Genette, 1982, p. 11). The term "metafiction" was coined in 1970 to describe works where metatextuality is predominant (Waugh, 1985, p. 2), although the self-reflexive quality, which is also a marker of metatextuality, has a

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<sup>1</sup> Indigenous Australian children, of mixed parentage, forcibly removed from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait families by the Australian government and church missionaries between 1910 and 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Mob refers to a group of Aboriginal people from a particular place or country. The term is used by Aboriginal people across Australia.

longer history – dating back as far as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Hutcheon 1980/2013, p. 4–5, 9). Metatextuality has stirred debates among literary critics and theorists. As Michelle Ryan-Sautour (2003) outlines, some commentators identify it as narcissistic (such as Jameson and Eagleton); while others observe its political dimension (for instance Barthes, Foucault, Bakhtin and Brecht). In this respect, Wenche Ommundsen points to the binary logic according to which “fiction cannot, at the same time, be about itself and about something else” (1993, p. 3). She proposes a resolution to this “perceived incompatibility between reflexivity and involvement with reality” (1993, p. 5) by overcoming western dualist thinking.

Metatextuality has been noted for its political and ideological functions (Sohier, 2003). Historiographic metafiction, a subgenre of metatextuality, is exemplar in that it asks such questions as “what gets recorded of the past? Whose stories get told, and why? What gets saved in the archive and why?” (Hutcheon, 1980/2013, p. IX). These questions echo the ones posed by postcolonial theorist Edward Said: “Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?” (1982, p. 7). More recently, these interrogations have been picked up again by Tlostanova and Mignolo, for whom decolonial thinking brings a change in the terms of the conversation, where the enunciation is taken up by colonised peoples (2012, p. 35). In this paper, the three novels make a political use of metatextuality in order to ask: “who tells which story? Who is deemed a legitimate writer? For whom do they write? Which genealogy of thought, which other texts and knowledges do they refer to?” Writing from the borders is the resistance strategy of these three novels whereby they expose how First Nations peoples, have been, and still are, racialised and constructed as different and inferior. Furthermore, the texts centre a non-Western genealogy of thought and of feeling, claiming First Nations peoples' rights as knowers and storytellers, and they enter into a critical relationship with Western literature. In the following analysis we demonstrate how this resistance to postcolonising power relationships is operationalised in the texts through metatextual comments.

### **Writing from the Borders**

In *L'île des rêves écrasés*, Tetiare is a proud Mā'ohi woman who is the granddaughter of an Englishman, Charles Williams. Interested, like her older brother Terii, in their culture and working with him on archaeological projects, she is described as a passionate character, too passionate. She is encouraged by Terii to take up the pen:

Passion leads to excess. We have a long tradition of tolerance and patience. If you are calmer everything will go more smoothly. You should write, find a channel for all those ideas seething inside you. If you think we should know about our history, write a book for us to read. Everything has been written by foreigners. We almost end up

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believing that we really are the way they describe us, when you know very well they haven't understood a thing. Complete brain-washing. It's time to write our history as we see it ourselves. Reverse the brain-washing (Spitz, 1991, p. 145).

Terii defines Tetiare's literary work as cathartic, expressing her anger, as well as being corrective, turning around the colonial "brainwashing". Terii reclaims their perspective as the correct one: not only has all that has been written about Mā'ohi culture been written by white people, but they have misrepresented them whilst enforcing that this external perspective was the only one.

Contrasting with Tetiare's corrective literary project, the one in which mother-daughter team Della and Jasmine engage in *After Story* is more conservative, designed to save an oral knowledge threatened to disappear in order to pass it on. Resorting to the lexical field of forgetting and memory, the daughter explains: "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" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 288).

A similar sense of urgency is attributed to the Wiradjuri dictionary project in *The Yield* with the language and knowledge being linked to the death of an authority figure, grandfather Albert Gondiwindi. The significance of this knowledge is taken up by the granddaughter to fight for legal recognition of her people's land rights.

By casting First Nations characters as readers commenting on Western literature, discourses, and documentation, the novels represent them as knowing agents; including the knowledge that whiteness encompasses a race privilege. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003, p. 67) contends, this reversal of positions exposes the epistemic dimension of postcolonising power relationships:

White women and men do not just position us as being the "unseen": we are also perceived as "unseeing".

But Indigenous women do see, analyse and have knowledge about whiteness – knowledge that is usually dismissed, ignored or rebuffed by whites upon whom we cast our gaze and about whom we write. [...] the dismissal and suppression of our knowledge about whiteness is tied to the maintenance of white racial domination and privilege in this country (Australia).

*The Yield's* main characters, grandfather and granddaughter Albert and August Gondiwindi, are depicted as both very bookish, even though he had been taken away and sent to a Mission to be raised as a labourer; and she was nagged by her schoolteacher. From the beginning, Albert confides that he treasures the English dictionary that his wife Elsie had given him. He nonetheless exposes the deficits of the English language, inadequate to the Australian land. The English Oxford Dictionary thus plays the role of a literary counter-model for Albert who decides to compile the words of his ancestral language counter-alphabetically as a symbol of countering and subverting the Western perspective: "We don't have a Z word in our alphabet, I reckon, so I thought I'd start backwards, a nod to the backwards blackfella world I grew up in, start at Y – *yarrany*" (Winch, 2019, p. 12). Reflecting on the alphabetical order that contributes to the apparent neutrality and pseudo-objectivity of dictionaries, Albert advocates for a politicised reading as well as for subjectivity. In doing so, he defines his own decolonial aesthetic mode that will hybridize the style of the dictionary with personal stories, in an act of epistemic disobedience: "The dictionary is not just words, - there are little stories in those pages too" (Winch, 2019, p. 11). Albert's book will thus unfold exposing different perspectives, as exemplified by the title word "yield" that illustrates completely different relations to land, in opposition to notions of "to take" and "to give" (Winch, 2019, p. 25). The comment has a strong metatextual dimension, echoing the project of the book itself that is centred on Wiradjuri characters claiming their languages and, by doing so, their land. As for August, she reflects on how the Western classics she was exposed to as a young reader were all centred on whiteness, invisibilising non-European peoples: "she could never find herself or her sister. Never a girl like August or Jedda Gondiwindi, not ever" (Winch, 2019, p. 62).

Possessing "a wisdom you couldn't find in books" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 271), in *After Story*, the mother Della reflects on the tour's literary places, the authors and their books. The places she visits trigger memories of Aunty Elaine's stories, the present of the tour mixing with the past as well as the future, as Della will decide to record these ancestral stories in written form. Della shares Aunty Elaine's counter-hegemonic narratives of the invasion of Australia. Comparing the London plague with the smallpox epidemic in colonial Australia, she measures the effects of introduced diseases on the Indigenous communities around Sydney. Comparing the 17<sup>th</sup> century Sackvilles' house with her forty thousand years civilisation, as well as "ancient" druid stones with her ancestors' fish traps, Della claims the longevity of her culture. She regrets that it is simply ignored by non-Indigenous people, her people deemed "backwards" and their epistemic rights denied "to justify taking land and children" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 155). The analogy between Oxford's religious martyrs and Indigenous "warriors", who "were heroes really" reminds the reader of the violence and illegitimacy of the invasion. Under the authority figure of Aunty Elaine, Della and Jasmine not only remember their



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cultural stories but they also reflect on historiography. Their meta historiographic comments expose the partiality of knowledge. As Jasmine comments:

Aunty Elaine would remind me 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)

Living in fictional worlds that recreate postcolonising societies, the characters experience racism and, as a consequence, they develop a “split subjectivity” or, as W.E.B. Dubois phrased it, a “double consciousness” (quoted in Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 68). Their subjectivity is partly formed by the colonial logic of differences that construct them as the others of modernity, as subhuman, as not-knowing or unseeing. The resulting split subjectivity is symbolised in the novels by characters who are unsure of themselves as they are becoming writers; doubting their own skills, having been brainwashed by colonial educational institutions that they were unworthy of writing.

In *L’île des rêves écrasés*, Tetiare, the youngest of Emere and Tematua’s children, expresses such self-doubts when reacting to her older brother’s empowering encouragement to write: “Will I be able to do it?” (Spitz, 1991, p.145). Tetiare embodies what we call here “writers from the border”, after Tlostanova and Mignolo’s definition of border thinking or epistemology (2012, p. 62-3; see also p. 19). Border thinking:

emerges primarily from the people’s anti-imperial epistemic responses to the colonial difference – the difference that hegemonic discourse endowed to “other” people, classifying them as inferior and at the same time asserting its geographical and body-social configurations as superior and the models to be followed.

Just when Tetiare is about to achieve her own book, she remembers being made to feel inferior by a Papa’ā (white) teacher, and this memory makes her doubt her legitimacy as a Mā’ohi writer:

She has almost finished her text and is beginning to have doubts.... She senses that the critics will not spare her, and the demons of her teenage years, that she thought she had forgotten, come back sometimes to haunt her, the result of the horrific stupidity of some of her high school teachers, Papa’ā of course.... She washes away this dirt by writing (Spitz, 1991, p. 182).

In this context, Tetiāre's literary project is decolonial in that it claims back the dignity of "everyone who has been told again and again their whole lives through that they're worthless because they're Mā'ohi" (Spitz, 1991, p. 182). Although the reader will not read a word of Tetiāre's written work, its objectives highlight those of Spitz's novel, as the one is superimposed in the other in a metatextual relationship.

Lacking education in the Western school system, Della in *After Story* is often marginalised by the other people on the literary tour. Nonetheless, her thoughts and feelings are centred through a first-person narration. Her diary recounts her experience of the borders, as exemplified by the passage where she is humiliated by white women for her defense of hunting, with Celia deeming her perspective "ridiculous". The internal focalisation however gives the reader access to Della's argumentation in favour of a respectful practice that has regulated the ecosystem for millennia (Behrendt, 2021, p. 90). A history of racialisation and a life spent in a postcolonising society has made Della doubt herself as a subject capable of producing knowledge: "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" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 184). Despite this taught lack of confidence, Della starts consigning her own cultural stories in her notebook, clearly shifting the direction of her writing, which was originally limited to taking notes from Lionel the tour guide: "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" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 209).

The first member of her family to enter university, Jasmine's experience of the borders is different to her mother's: she realises that her subjectivity is split, shaped by both her Western training, and her Indigenous belonging. In a final epistemological reflection, she opposes her university "education" to "Aunty Elaine's stories and knowledge", with the temporal adverb "still" indicating that her ancestral knowledge remains with her, even if it has been (made) dormant throughout her university years:

One history builds over another. Our truths are shaped by what is said and what isn't, formed by the beats chosen to tell a story. 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. (Behrendt, 2021, p. 288)

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Jasmine's image of her double knowledge as a palimpsest echoes Moreton-Robinson's description of Indigenous people's subjective doubleness:

Indigenous people may have been incorporated in and seduced by the cultural forms of the colonizer, but this has not diminished the ontological relationship to land. Rather, it has produced a doubleness whereby Indigenous subjects can "perform" whiteness, while being Indigenous.... There is always a subject position that can be thought of as fixed in its inalienable relation to land. This subject position cannot be erased by colonizing processes, which seek to position the Indigenous as object, inferior, other.... (2015, p. 11)

Jasmine realises that she was made to believe that there was only one valid perspective: "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" (Behrendt, 2021, p. 219). She then reevaluates what Aunty Elaine passed on to her as invaluable, yet threatened, ancestral knowledge. It nonetheless survived through to today and can be transmitted by a collective project. Della and Jasmine's literary tour has a paradoxical outcome with both characters becoming writers from the borders: their trip to England doesn't enforce an imperial idolatry for white authors; rather, it inspires them to claim epistemic equity by writing their own stories, adding their existing stories to the written world. This literary project is defined in collective terms through the image of weaving. As Jasmine muses:

I 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. (Behrendt, 2021, p. 291–292)

In all three novels, the characters who become writers from the borders take as reference in their genealogy of knowledge people who have been disempowered and made inferior. In *L'île des rêves écrasés*, Tetiare turns to her māmā, her grandmother Teuira, as soon as she considers writing:

Teuira is the one she has always turned to whenever she felt lost. There's a special, unexplained bond between them. Teuira, eternal image of the ancient world, has no need for words. Tetiare, image of the new world, a mixture of yesterday and tomorrow, a butterfly trying to emerge by means of the world.... Tetiare looks at her grandmother,

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who always knows how to talk to her, how to find words from the heart. She draws energy from her, and from the ancient wisdom her grandmother tries to teach her. The old woman has given her children everything she knows, knowledge passed on through the words she has spoken. Now it is time to pass her knowledge on to others through the written word, the ones that endure. (Spitz, 1991, p. 145–147)

An aesthetic and epistemic model is created, where the figure of authority is embodied by a character who has been subjected to racism and othering through a colonial construction of differences. Aunty Elaine plays a similar role as māmā Teuira, both depicted as knowledgeable, and as empowering the characters who become writers. Contrasting Aunty Elaine’s interesting knowledge with the boring education she received in school, Della values her as her figure and source of relevance: “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” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 43). Superlatives impose her as an authority figure: “the wisest” (p. 11)” and “the most senior woman in town (p. 220)”. Aunty Elaine’s knowledge, which is not individual but collective as it is derived from her ancestors, is in an inalienable relation to land. This situated and embodied knowledge is as valid as any other, as is suggested through the repetition and comparison of the verb “to read”. Their ancestors “could read the land the way Jazzie reads a book” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 45; see also p. 152). Taking Aunty Elaine as a reference draws a genealogy of knowledge outside of Western authority figures. When Professor Finn takes Shakespeare as the epitome of refinement, Della reflects on the colonial classification of cultures and the hierarchisation of knowledge. From the perspective of a First Nations member who knows the extraordinary longevity of their cultures, such “ranking” appears fallacious:

He [Professor Finn] said: “No other culture produced a Shakespeare.” And I thought, well, no other culture produced an Aunty Elaine. And I wondered why it was that people had to make those comparisons the way my father used to.... 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. (Behrendt, 2021, p. 233)

With its characters embarked on a literary tour and yet deciding to turn away from English references in order to put on paper their own ancestral oral stories, *After Story* describes an alternative genealogy of knowledge. However, there is a risk that First Nations’ stories will again be subjected to objectification by non-Indigenous readers. This is exemplified when Meredith, a white woman, fascinated by what she calls “Dreamtime stories” subjects Della to a draining interrogatory, exploiting her

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knowledge (Behrendt, 2021, p. 182–184). Meredith’s benevolent yet anthropological gaze prompts Della to reflect on the reception of her stories, with Meredith figuratively playing the role of a non-Indigenous reader in the text. In a metatextual comment, Della regrets that their stories are too often labelled as “dreams”, as if they were mere fictions from the past, when they actually are part of a surviving complex social organisation. Metatextuality is therefore used to give instructions on how to read Indigenous literature in a decolonial way, by avoiding a sense of anachronism:

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. (Behrendt, 2021, p. 212–213)

The three novels each broaden their use of metatextuality to encompass intersemioticity as they undertake reflections on signs through a reading of material culture. *The Yield* reactivates the tradition of *ekphrasis* to highlight the beauty and sophistication of the *coolamon*; the artefact acting as a synecdoche for First Nations’ cultures (Winch, 2019, p. 92–94). In both Australian Indigenous works, the characters visit museums which leaves them wondering about their selection criteria. The ranking of cultures, with some artefacts deemed worthy to be saved and shown in museums or preserved as heritage while others are not, is addressed in *The Yield* when August visits the Roman ruins of Hadrian’s Wall north of Middlesbrough. Comparing the Roman Empire with her culture, she observes that her ancestors’ artefacts are undervalued and disqualified:

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. (Winch, 2019, p. 247)

Yet when First Nations’ artefacts do feature in museum collections, their presence raises issues of dispossession and objectification. *After Story* denounces the

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philosophical concept of universalism for providing a justification for the appropriation of Indigenous artefacts, with its assumed: “right to take, to rename, to catalogue, to hold in the name of the advancement of your own theories, knowledges and sciences” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 218). Jasmine concludes that museums bear witness to domination: “Museums are full of collectables from conquests” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 218). Using a similar lexicon of theft and dispossession, in *The Yield*, August wonders about repatriation and how to get back her ancestors’ “stolen” artefacts (Winch, 2019, p. 264). Despite the highly political contexts of collecting, museum scenography tends to evacuate the violent processes involved in artefact’s origins of procurement with an aesthetic presentation of the works. When August and her aunt Missy visit the Historic Museum Australia, politics is confined to one room showing a photo of chained Aboriginal men, but outside the room, all the works are presented in a fetishized way that highlights their anthropologic or aesthetic qualities while obscuring the fact that their very presence in a museum has been made possible by violent dispossession. Missy gets angry at this fetishisation of cultures that have been suppressed, exposing as “tokenism” the hypocrisy of appreciating a culture after attempting to destroy it (Winch, 2019, p. 261). Albert’s direct speech in Missy’s mind breaks the fiction of a peaceful colonisation process and, by extension, the collection of artefacts, with repetitive questions and imperatives: “They didn’t just take our land with guns and bullets; there were other ways just as lethal – look, Missy. Look harder!” (Winch, 2019, p. 262)

Dispossession is obscured by an objectifying presentation in which the “glass” of museum presentation is a synecdoche. The distance produced by the glass is a metaphor for the separation between the subject and object. In *After Story*, Della on seeing the dodo in an unrealistic bush scenography that only highlights its extinction, is reminded of Aunty Elaine’s defiance of museums for their objectifying presentation of Indigenous peoples relegating them to a distant past: “Aunty Elaine was always suspicious of museums, at least the ones where she thought they might treat Aboriginal people as something under a microscope and our culture as a relic” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 206-207). The characters’ visits in museums therefore pose the question of how cultures are presented, showing that a morbid eulogy of Indigenous cultures is problematic when associated with a view of history in which they belong to a past version of humanity. The novels refuse the historicist view that permeates museums in which artefacts are fetishised as “relics”, suggesting that First Nations’ cultures belong to the past. Albert’s dictionary in *The Yield* exposes how this sense of anachronism is linked to a ranking of people and their civilisation by placing in quotation marks stereotypes of First Nations. He notes that the colonisers “thought that us ‘Stone Age’ people needed to be exterminated come hell or high water” (Winch, 2019, p. 263). His granddaughter August compares the museum to a cemetery, remembering how she was exposed in school to a similar ideology of extinction:

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It was as if she were walking through a cemetery, tombstones jutted. She'd realised 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 as she followed the arrow to the archaeology collections. (Winch, 2019, p. 263–264)

In *L'île des rêves écrasés*, Terii's lover, the white engineer Laura Lebrun, misinterprets the role of the photographs on the walls of the nuclear base. She ingenuously believes that the exhibition celebrates the land in its pristine, pre-nuclear form, when in fact, for her white patriarchal colleagues, they are just another proof of their colonial mission; that they bring civilisation:

When Laura goes into the room for the first time, she is touched by the delightful sensitivity of her colleagues, who have clearly tried to preserve a photographic memory of a world which no longer exists. How disappointing, then, when she compliments Yan and the others on their wonderful idea, that they stare at her in absolute astonishment and answer:

“My dear Laura, what typically female sentimentality. Woman, I ask you! There's no place for poetic day-dreaming in this sanctuary of military technological progress. These photographs aren't there so we'll think sweet thoughts about this useless strip of land. They're a clear-cut demonstration of our progress, testament to our country's greatness. All the natives who tried to oppose the base will have to acknowledge our superiority, and thank our President-General and our Nation for bringing them out of the Dark Ages.” (Spitz, 1991, p. 122-124)

In opposition to the morbid exhibition of Indigenous cultures as relics in museums, the characters' literary projects intend to share them as alive and embodied: “When Auntie 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” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 218).

Although the three novels are written in imperial languages – French and English – they include words in the characters' Indigenous languages. By way of this bilingualism, they dwell in the colonial linguistic borders. *L'île des rêves écrasés* is framed within a Tahitian peritext; it opens with a creation myth, includes a wide range

of Tahitian words such as “tāmā’ara’a”, “mōrī ‘āva’e”, “pito” (meaning feast, petrol lamp and navel) and closes with a glossary (Spitz, 1991, pp. 35, 66, 101). *The Yield* incorporates Grandfather Alberts’ dictionary starting with the letter Y for *yarrany*. *After Story* hints that Della and Jasmine’s book will be at least partially in *lingo*: “Then, I heard Aunty Elaine saying the word ‘winanga-li’, a fragment of the old language that means ‘to hear or listen’” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 249). In addition to bilingualism, the novels also include metalinguistic comments, addressing the colonial hierarchisation of languages (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 62). Della exposes the deficiencies of the English language: “All in all, English is a pretty poor language, especially when it comes to feelings. The word that comes to mind is ‘impoverished’” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 213).

The novels’ insistence on Indigenous cultures as alive in the present, is exemplified by the presentation of First Nations’ languages as spoken, and about which instructions on pronunciation must be given. Metalinguistic comments on the pronunciation of English are treated with irony: “It’s funny how so many words in English never sound like they look, which must make it hard for people to learn it all. When Aunty Elaine explained a word in our old language it always read like it sounded – ‘yaama’ for hello, ‘dinewan’ for emu, ‘biggibilla’ for echidna” (Behrendt, 2021, p. 123). This ironic tone is also used to reveal how colonial English speakers mispronounced and incorrectly transliterated the Wiradjuri language: “The Old Reverend in his notes, he wrote down *cooyah* – but the word comes from further back in the mouth, *guya*” (Winch, 2019, p. 205).

The orality of Indigenous languages furthermore creates an “embodied subjectivity” (2010, p. 17) which challenges the Cartesian mind/body divide (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Quijano, 2007). This is exemplified in *The Yield*, through August’s incarnate description of missing her ancestral language:

Since she was a girl the ache had scratched further inside her, for something complete to rest at her tongue, her throat. The feeling that nothing was ever properly said, that she’d existed in a foreign land of herself. (Winch, 2019, p. 29)

Yet, more than individual subjectivity, the novels, in reclaiming First Nations languages as spoken and storied, determine a reception that is community-oriented. *The Yield* contrasts the Wiradjuri *garrandarang* (dictionary) written in stories, against a dictionary as monument, precisely to move away from a colonial heritage approach that would, again, treat their cultures as extinct and past. Instead, the book inside Winch’s book, right from the beginning as inscribed in its foreword, calls for a community practice of the old language: “Better these words and better we are still here and that we speak them” (Winch, 2019, p. 310).



## Never Forgetting: Decolonial Novels as Resistance

As a literary device drawing the readers' attention into the fabrication of fictions, metatextuality provides a resistance strategy for decolonial novels. Through metatextual comments, they expose power relationships and the colonial construction of difference as they affect people, their cultures, and their languages. These reflections include an epistemological dimension – with racialised characters who nonetheless become writers, reclaiming their epistemic rights as storytellers. The specific location from which these characters write is from the Oceania borders: they are both marginalised in postcolonising societies and yet they centre their own perspectives and genealogy of thought.

Writing from the borders thus creates a pattern of “superimposition” (Moreton-Robinson, 2010, p. 13-14), which describes Indigenous peoples' subjectivity, in which an often-ironic commentary relationship with the Western canon, texts, and institutions is drawn; while First Nations' ontologies and epistemologies are centred. If to decolonise is “to delink [but] not to abandon”, “to deal with...colonial sedimentation” (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012, p. 78; see also Tuhiwai Smith, 1999/2021, p. 43), then metatextuality is a literary device through which to practice such a critical relationship, in an “anti-colonial spirit of gratitude” (Chakravarty, 2000, p. 255). In *L'île des rêves écrasés*, Tetiara's older brother not only persuades her to write, but he encourages the community to keep the ancestral ways alive. Tematua's words at each of his children's births can be thus read on a metatextual level as a program for decolonial works to deal with their heritages: “May none of you ever forget / The heritage of our Fathers” (Spitz, 1991, p. 70, 74).

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