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**A Postcolonial Study of Aboriginal Identity  
in Tara June Winch's *The Yield***

Visto e prace,

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## ABSTRACT

This study aspires to explore the issue of Aboriginal identity in Tara June Winch's novel *The Yield* (2019) from a postcolonial point of view. In order to fulfill this main goal, I will focus on four major aspects connected to Aboriginality that are particularly relevant in the novel: language and culture, history and traditions, the importance of returning home in Aboriginal literature and, last but not least, Indigenous peoples and their relationship with the land. The methodologies used to carry out this paper were a previous close reading analysis of *The Yield*, researching about Aboriginal culture, language and struggles, and studying the history of Australian Aboriginal communities in relation to their identities. After years of being subjected to a colonial empire, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia are still suffering the consequences of a system fueled by white supremacy and imperialism. Stories like *The Yield*, contribute to Australia's First Nations being validated and accepted.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal peoples, postcolonial studies, Australia, identity, language, land, colonialism, imperialism, British Empire.

“One day your dancing, your dreaming, your song  
Will take me your Spirit back where I belong  
My Mother, the earth, the land - I demand  
Protection from aliens who rule, who command  
For they do not know where their dreaming began.”

Eva Johnson

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of postcolonialism comprises the inherently complex nature of intersectionality in relation to the colonizer-colonized power dynamics. In order to understand the relationship between these two very different groups, it is important to establish a proper definition for the term *postcolonial*. According to Ashcroft et al., the before mentioned concept could be described as following:

‘Post-colonialism/ postcolonialism’ is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. While its use has tended to focus on the cultural production of such communities, it is becoming widely used in historical, political, sociological and economic analyses, as these disciplines continue to engage with the impact of European imperialism upon world societies (*Post-Colonial Studies* 169).

Now that the meaning of postcolonialism has been clarified, it would only be fitting to explain how the root of this term, that is to say, colonialism, intersects with class, gender and ethnicity. For the purpose of this analysis, this essay will focus on the institutional persecution, enslavement and both physical and psychological abuse that marginalized communities were subjected to for — at least — the last 500 years. In the course of five centuries, white Europeans forced the Native peoples to “adapt” to a way of life in which their sole purpose was to enrich their oppressors, and this is where the previous concepts mix: in order for the upper-class to thrive, there had to be a low one; whiteness needed to be uplifted and therefore the myth of the inferior race was born, and hegemonic masculinity was enhanced by subordinating the women of the colonies.

The atrocities these vulnerable groups went through still have repercussions on the newer generations, where issues such as structural racism are still deeply embedded in our society. The shadow of colonialism still lingers in the former colonies, and it could be said that it is definitely one of the main reasons — if not *the* reason — for the societal problems of the many countries that were subjected to imperial rule. From the high rates of gender-based violence to the never-ending circles of institutionalized poverty, the colonized nations are the product of a system that was designed to destabilize and exploit entire societies, and this is very much the case of the subject matter of this dissertation: Aboriginal Australia.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been the original custodians of what is nowadays known as Australia since the beginning of time. They share many aspects regarding their way of life, but it is also important to recognize and celebrate their individualities. Aboriginality, as a concept, encompasses a sense of community in itself that denotes a collective feeling of belonging both to the land and to their ancestors. These two

notions are essential to comprehend the culture and society of not only the Aboriginal Australians but also of all the First Nations around the world. Due to the rampant effects of colonialism, imperialism and white supremacy, Indigenous nations — as well as many other historically marginalized groups — have been declassified, stigmatized and alienated, which is the proof that the euro-centric idea of the colonial *Other*<sup>1</sup> was (and still is) heavily ingrained in our society.

The oppressive hand of the British Empire has marked and shattered the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities since the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1770. The invasion and later process of disintegration of the Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Island was justified under the false idea of Terra Nullius<sup>2</sup>, where the so-called “settlers” dismantled these communities’ social dynamics, systematically destroying Aboriginal bodily integrity and their connection to the land. As mentioned before, the not-so-vestiges of colonialism are still harming the Aboriginal peoples to this day, where issues such as the loss of identity and the criminalization of the youth are two of the reasons why there has not been a proper integration of these communities into a post-colonial society, or, in other words, why they have been unlawfully marginalized (Korff, “Aboriginal communities are breaking down”).

These and many other issues are dealt with in Tara June Winch’s most recent novel, *The Yield* (2019). A Wiradjuri woman herself, the writer has published Aboriginal-centric stories that question the colonial order in mainland Australia. The Miles Franklin Award winner raises awareness of the situations Aboriginal Australians have to face on a daily basis as well as alluding to topics such as the Stolen Generation and the ongoing fight to get their lands back. In *The Yield*, the reader gets to know the story of August Gondiwindi, a Koori woman that has to come back to Australia for her grandfather’s funeral, only to discover a long-forgotten family

secret. The story is constructed from three different narratives, the first being from the point of view of August, the protagonist. The second viewpoint the reader has is August's grandfather, Albert, who tells his story through the entries of a dictionary of Wiradjuri terms that he is writing. This is especially interesting since the dictionary shapes the story in a very organic way and gives the reader an insight into Aboriginal culture, traditions, spirituality and historical struggles. The third narrator is a nineteenth century missionary, Reverend Ferdinand Greenleaf, whose story is connected to the main plot because he used to run a mission in the Gondiwindi's current residence. Greenleaf's letter is plagued with anecdotes that help the reader understand the atrocities that took place two centuries ago not only in Australia but in many other former colonies around the world.

The main objective of this dissertation is to analyze, from a postcolonial perspective, the issues raised in the novel *The Yield*. Said issues can be encompassed under the umbrella term of Aboriginal "identity," in which many other sub themes emerge and are dealt with in the book. Although such a complex topic cannot be summarized in less than 11.000 words, I will try my best to exhibit, through this paper, the experience of Aboriginal communities in relation to the effects of colonialism using Tara June Winch's work as a case study. The main focus of this study is to dissect four important topics in relation to Aboriginal identity and their collective experience in the wake of colonialism, which are the importance of language in relation to culture, history and tradition, the phenomenon of 'returning home' in Aboriginal literature and, last but not least, Indigenous peoples and their connection to the land. The methodologies used to complete this dissertation were studying Australian history regarding their Aboriginal peoples, doing a close reading analysis of *The Yield* in the search of parallel structures about the matter at hand, and finally, researching postcolonial texts and theory.



## 2. INDIGENOUS LITERATURE

### 2.1. Literary Canon and Aboriginal Themes

It would be safe to say that the process in which a literary canon is constructed is generally based on the artistic movement that is taking place at a specific point in time. Another factor that has to be taken into consideration when analyzing literature is the general message — either subliminal or not — behind the many articles, books and magazines that are published. In the case of Great Britain, more specifically of England, it can be stated that the rise of English literature as an object of study during the nineteenth century was linked to the increasing growth of the British Empire. Due to this matter, concepts such as “savage” or “primitive” were used to establish a difference between the British and their colonized subjects (Ashcroft et al., “The Empire Writes Back” 3). By distancing themselves from these nations, the imperial narrative created the civilized-uncivilized dichotomy, creating the belief that everything that was not part of Britain (or properly British) was barbarian and therefore “needed” to be educated and cultured. The fact that such negative notions about non-white people were being spread harmed their integrity and the way people perceived them, creating ideas that still exist to this day.

In view of the detrimental characterization the people of the colonies were subjected to, the phenomenon of postcolonial literature was born. To say that these literatures are only a reaction to the colonial regime is quite a reductionist approach, but it should be borne in mind that this is true to a certain extent. While the works reclaim individuality within the colonial spectrum and provide a proper depiction of the various cultures that encompass the postcolonial

experience, postcolonial literature and theory has expanded since it was first developed. Moreover, the before mentioned concept comprises a wide range of ethnicities and nationalities, so it would not be appropriate to use generalizations when referring to the term due to the different experiences (both individual and collective) the former colonized had.

The production of literature in the settler colonies<sup>3</sup> has been marked by the contrast between the white Europeans who relocated in the colonies and the Indigenous populations. In the settler colonies, where European culture almost erased Indigenous identities, the creation of texts was associated with the descendants of the colonizers and not with the original custodians of the land. In *The Empire Writes Back* (2002), Ashcroft et al. state: “The three major issues they raise are the relationship between social and literary practices in the old world and the new; the relationship between the indigenous populations in settled areas and the invading settlers; and the relationship between the imported language and the new place. In critical practice these are often inextricably interwoven” (133).

Furthermore, Ashcroft et al., in regard to the issues raised about Indigenous textuality, state:

In terms of their own developing writing, however, the position of groups such as the Maoris, Inuit, and Australian Aborigines is a special one because they are doubly marginalized – pushed to the psychic and political edge of societies which themselves have experienced the dilemma of colonial alienation. For this reason they demonstrate a capacity, far greater than that of white settler societies, to subvert received assumptions about literature (*Post-Colonial Studies* 142).

In the case of Australia, the clash of cultures and the subsequent eradication of Aboriginal communities has been a widely studied subject in relation to postcolonial literature.

In order to understand this, it is important to bear in mind that, by establishing themselves as the norm, the British pushed Indigenous peoples to the periphery of “civilized” society (Ashcroft et al., “Post-Colonial Studies” 32), where they still reside nowadays thanks to the social and economic exclusion they suffer. This issue caused Aboriginal literature to explore the place Indigenous cultures hold within a predominantly white society and the relationship between aboriginality and European customs.

When it comes to *The Yield*, this binary opposition is crystal clear from the moment the reader gets to learn about the Gondiwindi — the protagonist’s family — and their relationship with the white “part” of town. On one occasion, August explains that, when she was a child, she was not the only girl that was segregated at her school. Apart from her and her sister Jedda, she recalls not being invited to a white classmate’s birthday party along with an Asian friend she had. This “*Us vs. Them*” narrative proves to be intersectional, for it does not exclude anybody that does not fit in the colonial mold. The way in which BIPOC<sup>4</sup> are affected by the many layers of structural racism shows that colonial ideas still prevail.

This marginalization of Aboriginal communities can also be seen in Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987), in which she describes in detail that the fact that non-white people lived in the impoverished areas of her hometown was detrimental not only to the communities’ relationship with white Australians but also with themselves as individuals and as a group. Years of internalized racism fueled by white supremacy and colonial power led to the marginalization of Indigenous populations, in which they were placed in poverty-stricken zones and looked down on. It could be said that this created a stigma associated to Aboriginal communities that only increased the endless cycle of racial violence they were — and still are — subjected to, as seen in *The Yield*: “That’s what we were—isolated—from our family, from our language, from our

cultural ways, and from our land (...) we were brutalized, we turned to each other, we were isolated in our humiliation but we couldn't leave neither (...) we were criminals by birth, inmates since we could walk. Together and isolated at once" (Winch 277).

## 2.2. Representation Matters

It is no coincidence that the books promoted by the British Empire had stories that revolved around middle to upper class white characters. These characters, portrayed as heroes and explorers, were the result of male authors projecting their power fantasies through colonial narratives, hence the creation of works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* (1912). From a postcolonial perspective, the fact that the white man was capable of being a champion on the face of adversity only endangered the portrayal of what "adversity" was. Dark, hot jungles and arid deserts were exotic enough for the British to thrive and, of course, do what they came to do: to plunder and conquer. As explained before, the native peoples of the colonies were also subjected to dangerous stereotyping, creating an image that still exists nowadays. In other words, these types of books not only depicted the Empire as a model for the colonies, but also reduced the native peoples to the worst possible characterization, solely based on what the authors thought they knew about the colonies. This issue gave rise to Edward Said's concept of "colonial discourse," in which the West characterizes its colonial subjects and promotes a system that "is greatly implicated in ideas of the centrality of Europe, and thus in assumptions that have become characteristic of modernity: assumptions about history, language, literature and 'technology'" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al., "Post-Colonial Studies" 37).

So, when talking about representation, more specifically in literary works, it would be safe to say that it is extremely important to validate and support Indigenous' voices and

experiences. Through literature, Aboriginal communities can dismantle harmful characterizations and racist stereotypes while providing a safe space for people in the community to find something they can relate to. In *The Yield*, the protagonist describes that she found her passion for books and literature at a very early age. August proceeds to list the books she has been in contact with when she was a child, and she highlights that, even though she enjoyed them, she was not able to find herself represented in any of the works she read: “They recommended *Goosebumps*, *The Baby-Sitters Club*, to Roald Dahl, Judy Blume, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, Austen, Dickens, Faulkner. But in every mobile-library book, she could never find herself or her sister. Never a girl like August or Jedda Gondiwindi, not ever” (Winch 61). Mind you, some of the books and authors she mentioned are not inherently evil, but it is true that they belong to a canon in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women cannot identify with any of the characters.

The lack of representation in literature (and also in other types of arts such as cinema or TV shows) can lead to writers falling into stereotypes when trying to describe their characters. In this never-ending circle, minorities are often subjected to generalizations that perpetuate colonial ideas. In this case, and according to ReachOut, an online Australian mental health service, a problematic stereotype related to Aboriginal people is that they are naturally lazy, loud, and heavily accented (“I Want to Feel Valued”). The fact that Aboriginal children have to grow up seeing themselves portrayed in such a negative light is detrimental to the way they perceive their identity, alienating them from non-aboriginal Australians and broadening the already wide social and cultural gap between them. Representation matters because what is important about having a well-written character to relate to is the positive impact it has on the reader. In the case of August, if she had read books where there were characters just like her and her sister, maybe she would have felt less isolated both from her family and from herself. While she was reading what

is considered the standard lifestyle, customs and traditions, and realizing that it has nothing to do with her affected her relationship with herself and with what she knew as “normal,” setting an unachievable standard. On this issue, the protagonist states that “still at eighteen, [thinking] that England was where kids were born pure, with teatime and school head teachers, and long socks and boiled sweets and miniatures sailboat races along icy rivers. Childhoods like in the old book she’d read” (Winch 109). On a final note, it may be said that had Aboriginal women been represented in literature, this could have helped August to accept her “mob” and decolonize the sense of Otherness she felt throughout her childhood and most of her adult life. Seeing herself reflected in books could have strengthened her identity and made her feel more connected to her aboriginality.

### 3. LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is a fundamental tool when it comes to the development of the different cultures around the globe. It might look like the only function of language in society is communicating, but before this act, language helps individuals to perceive the world and to assign names to the things they know. Lera Boroditsky’s article, in relation to language and thought, shows the following:

But how do we know whether differences in language create differences in thought, or the other way around? The answer, it turns out, is both—the way we think influences the way we speak, but the influence also goes the other way. The past decade has seen a host of ingenious demonstrations establishing that language indeed plays a causal role in shaping cognition. Studies have shown that changing how people talk changes how they think. (65)

In the case of the Gondiwindis, the English language did change how they perceived the world and, most importantly, how they perceived themselves. This is part of Said's concept of "colonial discourse," due to the fact that this term deals with colonized communities being affected by the discourse promoted by the colonizers as the Indigenous peoples started to believe the assumptions made about them (qtd. in Ashcroft et al., "Post-Colonial Studies" 37). The fact that August was not able to think positively about her Aboriginality growing up shows that, in a certain way, she was conditioned to think like that. If she had been in contact with the Wiradjuri language, there is a possibility that she would have felt more connected to her people, her roots and her past.

### 3.1. Language and Colonization

The imposition of the English language and the penalization and subsequent ban on native languages has affected the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to a great extent. The expansion of the British Empire meant that the government of the colonies needed to establish English in order to legitimize their rule, giving rise to the hierarchization of languages (Phillipson 2), where the Indigenous ones were shamefully downgraded. The fact that Aboriginal peoples were disconnected from their native tongues was damaging to their perception of reality in relation to their position in this newly arranged society. In addition, not only this rapid change affected them linguistically, but also in the way they recognized their identity. In other words, with the arrival of European ideas to the island, the Indigenous communities were placed at the margin (or, as mentioned before, periphery) of what was considered "right."

Apart from penalizing those who were still willing to speak their native tongues, the colonial linguistic agenda promoted English as the ultimate language and the only valid one to be categorized as "civilized," even though that was not true, for their speakers did not treat the

Aboriginal peoples humanely. This meant that the Aboriginal communities were subjected not only to a physical colonization, but also a mental one, that continued as they were placed in institutions where they were “Europeanized,” once again becoming an alien on their own land. On a very similar note, the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains that this same situation happened in Africa:

African children who encountered literature in colonial schools and universities were thus experienced as defined and reflected in the European experience of history. Their entire way of looking at the world, even the world of the immediate environment, was Eurocentric. Europe was the centre of the universe. The world moved around the European intellectual scholarly axis. The images children encountered in literature were reinforced by their study of geography and history, and science and technology where Europe was, once again, the centre. This turn fitted well with the cultural imperatives of British imperialism (*Decolonising the Mind* 93).

This issue is directly related with August's being at a loss regarding her identity and her Aboriginal “Self.” Europe being the center of the universe meant that the Aboriginal communities were not even being considered a functional part of society, creating a system that delegitimized Indigenous bodily autonomy. This is illustrated all throughout the Reverend's letters, where he explains how Australia was built based on ideas that promoted white supremacy and the erasure of their Indigenous peoples: “Some people had an unwavering conviction that Australia should be united under a common identity, founded on the pioneers, the geography, the flora and fauna—not the immigrant, not the Native” (Winch 215-216).



### 3.2. Aboriginality in Language: The Case of the Wiradjuri

There is another matter to be considered when talking about language, colonization and the novel *The Yield*: Albert Gondiwini's dictionary. This neatly made and extense dictionary is a love letter to both the author and the protagonist's native tongue, Wiradjuri. Albert, when told that he was terminally ill and did not have much time left, Albert decided to compile a list of the terms he believed to be crucial for his people and his land. The contents range from information about flora and fauna to different adjectives and verbs, but what is most remarkable about this glossary is that it tells the story of Albert's life and his struggles — as well as his family's — as an Aboriginal community. From the very first moment readers become acquainted with the dictionary, they get fully immersed in a world of racism, white supremacy and heavy colonialism: "Think White. Act White. Be White" (23). This first-person insight into the horrors of imperial rule is uncomfortable yet necessary, for it reflects on the not-so-distant history of Australia.

The fact that Albert wanted to complete this dictionary as a sort of dying wish says a lot about his relationship with the Wiradjuri language. He states that he wants to make a dictionary in order to record his story, which could be a way of dealing with the intergenerational trauma<sup>5</sup> of not "having" a story or, in other words, of having their story gaslighted and almost erased: "A dictionary, even if this language isn't mine alone, even if it's something we grow into and then, living long enough, shrink away from. I am writing because the spirits are urging me to remember, and because the town needs to know what I remember, they need to know now more than ever before" (2). Through the dictionary, Albert might have found a way of passing to younger generations (e.g., August and her cousin) two important things related to Aboriginal identity: a language its stories. Albert's purpose could have been to provide Aboriginal youth

with a sense of connection to their mob, their land and to themselves through his life's story, as they might find someone to relate and from whom learn about their culture.

It could be said that language and culture are definitely intertwined in the making of somebody's identity. One thing cannot be completed without the other, so, in the case of Albert, the process of making the dictionary could have helped him validate his experience as part of a marginalized minority that is constantly being reminded of their "position" in society. Thus, he encourages the readers of his work to understand Aboriginal identity as a reality that goes far away from stereotypes. Even though he was unable to complete the dictionary, August and her cousin, Joey, included more stories and entries and decided to print it in order to hand it out to the town's Aboriginal youth. This denotes an interest in preserving what was lost and trying to revive a culture that was — and unfortunately, still is — oppressed for so many years: "English changed their tongues, the formation of their minds, August thought—she'd drifted in and out of herself all that time. The language [Wiradjuri] was the poem she had looked for, communicating what English failed to say" (300).

The double identity August recalls having is possibly the direct product of what was previously explained, what Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o calls "colonial alienation" (28) — and it is, in fact, this fragmentation of the self that troubles the protagonist and her family. Being part of two realities at once might have taken a toll on August's sense of self because these realities are not balanced or equal. While one is considered superior and therefore the only valid one, the other might have felt more "genuine" to her but, due to years of internalized racism and an eagerness to fit in (fueled by the same problematic societal behavior), she was not able to fully express herself, something she found out she could do after reading her grandfather's dictionary. Language, in a certain way, helped find the missing piece in her life, her Aboriginal identity:

“All the years that she had been adrift and tethered at once amounted to *something*, though. She’d rediscovered her family and who she truly was because of who they truly were” (Winch 303).

#### 4. HISTORY AND TRADITION

In order to understand and celebrate a culture, it is important to acknowledge its history. In the case of Indigenous peoples around the world, their respective histories are, unfortunately, subjected to the horrors of both colonialism and imperialism. As explained, Australia is not an exception when it comes to the attempted erasure and subsequent marginalization of Aboriginal communities, as many of the issues the Indigenous communities of Australia face nowadays are a direct consequence of a system built on colonial ideals. These issues are reflected in Winch’s novel through two subplots: the Reverend’s letters and August’s missing sister.

##### 4.1. Colonialism and the White Savior Complex

In the wake of colonialism, the white savior complex was born. Coined by Teju Cole, a Nigerian American novelist, the term “white savior industrial complex” is defined as “the confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege” (Anderson 39). In other words, this concept refers to the “need” usually white people have to help low-income communities in foreign countries. This term is rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century poem “The White Man’s Burden,” written by Rudyard Kipling in 1899 (Zane, “Barbie challenges the ‘white saviour complex’”) and deals with the act of travelling to countries categorized as “Third World” and aiding the Indigenous peoples, even if that help is purely insubstantial. Both selfish and naïve, this concept has colonial undertones that denote how necessary it is to deconstruct and decolonize such practices: “Don’t know what it is about us

[Aboriginal people] that seems to rile the White man. The burden, the burden of their memory perhaps, or that we weren't extinguished with the lights of those empires after all" (Winch 156).

The before mentioned term can be applied to the place Reverend Ferdinand Greenleaf had in Massacre Plain's mission. Even though the reader finds out at the end of the novel the clergyman's opinion about the colonial institution he was running, it is true that, although his intentions may have been noble, he was part of an apparatus that was fueled by white supremacy and imperialism. At first, he is inclined to help Indigenous peoples out of mercy after seeing the conditions the communities were living in: "I believe it was then, having seen those depths of desperate subsistence, that I felt sincerely compelled to help the Aborigine of the camps. I was sure of this as I had been of the Holy Spirit, my calling guided there by St. Jude himself" (70). This is similar to what happens in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where religion — more specifically, Christianity — is used as a form of colonization across Africa (Boahen et al. 197).

Moving on, this character is presented with an undeniably reality: the State is not willing to economically maintain missions, an act in which it becomes evident that the government does not care about the neglect Aboriginal communities are being subjected to: "We had no regular or certain income, except my donations for clergy work, so we were frequently reduced to the deepest poverty" (Winch 118). In his letter, the Reverend goes through a journey of "revelation," where he discovers, little by little, that the British Empire's main goal regarding Aboriginal communities in Australia is not to bring Christian values to them (as he initially thought). To his surprise, he encounters a system of oppression that denies the experience of Indigenous peoples.

The concept of "White Savior," seen in the Reverend's intentions, impacts Aboriginal communities were treated regarding their identity. When missions and residential schools started

to be used as a tool of manipulation and gaslighting, Australia's First Nations were, once again, subjugated under rule of the British Empire. These institutions were carefully constructed to delegitimize Aboriginal customs, spirituality, language, their connection to the land and their bodily autonomy under the false pretense of "assimilation" (Smith 3). By trying to "help" Aboriginal communities integrate into the newly founded Australia, the Reverend did just the opposite because he contributed to what Albert describes as *ngunba-ngidyala*: "As much as the government wants to convince the population otherwise, it is an old thinking—locking us up as a solution (...) The closed place, the shut place—the *ngunba-ngidyala*—is first built in the mind, and then it spreads" (Winch 196). The concept of "colonization of the mind," which was previously explained, comes into play in regard of the issue at hand: if the mind breaks, the spirit breaks.

#### 4.2. The Stolen Generations

The practice of removing Aboriginal children from their homes and placing them in residential or boarding schools resulted in what is known as The Stolen Generations. It is important to bear in mind that this issue did not take place only in Australia, for it also occurred in countries like Canada and the United States. According to Australians Together's study "The Stolen Generation: The forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families," between 1910 and 1970 the children of many Indigenous communities were criminally removed from their households in order to comply with government policies of assimilation. In regard to the assimilation of Aboriginal communities, the *Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities* (1937) stated the following:

The policy of the Commonwealth is to do everything possible to convert the half-caste into a white citizen. The question arises whether the same policy should not be adopted in

regard to the aborigines. In my opinion, there are three alternatives. First, we may adopt a policy of *laissez faire*, which, to every Protector of Aborigines, is repugnant; secondly, we may develop an enlightened elaborate system of protection which will produce an aboriginal population that is likely to swamp the white; or, thirdly, we may follow a policy under which the aboriginal will be absorbed into the white population. My view is that unless the black population is speedily absorbed into the white, the process will soon be reversed, and in 50 years, or a little later, the white population of the Northern Territory will be absorbed into the black (14).

As it can be seen in the previous excerpt, there was a growing fear among governmental institutions associated with the “black population” taking over “white civilization” in Australia. In other words, there was a general apprehension towards the figure of the Other and the possibility of Aboriginal peoples “absorbing” other cultures and ethnicities instead of being the “white” population the one who absorbed the “black” one. This is described by Ashcroft et al. as “going native” (*Post-Colonial Studies* 106), a term that deals with the concept of colonizers being afraid of “turning into” uncivilized savages. As a result of the policies of assimilation, the displacement of Aboriginal children began, creating long-lasting effects on the communities: “The removal of children broke important cultural, spiritual and family ties and has left a lasting and intergenerational impact on the lives and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies).

*The Yield* draws parallels between *The Stolen Generations* and the protagonist’s sister. In the story, the reader learns that August’s sister, Jedda, goes missing when they were children and, unfortunately, was never found. This situation affected August to a great extent and pushed her to leave her country abruptly, cutting ties with her family and friends. Nevertheless, the

people of Massacre Plains (a fictional town in New South Wales), which were described as a close-knit community, did not seem very concerned about a young girl — barely 10 years old — disappearing from the face of the Earth without leaving a trace:

The thing about a small town in a place like Massacre Plains is they love their own. Or if they don't love them, they at best stick by them; defend them against the outside world if troublemaking out-of-towners, tourists, big money. But the Gondiwindi weren't their own (...) Jedda, like the kids who went missing, the brown-skinned children like her, became a mystery manufactured to forget about. (Winch 28)

This lack of interest can also be seen in a society that wanted nothing to do with Aboriginal peoples back in the 1910s. This issue is also explored in the Reverend's letter, in which he details the inhuman acts committed by the Australian government. In one of the many occasions the extraction of children from the mission took place, the clergyman confesses that they were not granted information about the children's whereabouts and that the parents "ran away, choosing to conceal their infants with them in the bush, though most of them were captured and divided" (216). Not only did Australian authorities break many families but they also punished any attempt to restore the little stability Aboriginal communities had.

The fact that the removal of Aboriginal children from their families was a normalized procedure until recent years says a lot about the situation regarding Indigenous rights in Australia. These children, as well as Jedda, were robbed of the opportunity of having a life in contact with their Aboriginality and instead were inserted into a system whose goal was to eradicate their existence. The government, in a certain way, allowed the loss of identity of many children — if not all of them — that were part of the assimilation program. The Aboriginal youth that was born between the years 1910 to 1970, much like the protagonist's sister, "went missing"

not only from their families but from their communities and their identities. Thus, this created whole generations of Aboriginal peoples unable to recognize themselves and their place in society.

## 5. RETURNING HOME

### 5.1. What Makes a Place Home?

More often than not, the answer to this question has to do with family, friends and community rather than a place. In the case of August, who fled her home country searching for any kind of mental stability, her home was a town ridden with the ghosts of her childhood. The disappearance of her sister Jedda sent the protagonist down a rabbit hole of depression, confusion and anger that, unfortunately for her, did not vanish once she moved out of Massacre Plains. Even in London, where she tried (and failed) to settle down and begin a new life away from things she wanted to forget, August is incapable of letting go of the place she used to call home and finds herself worrying over aspects of her life she cannot control: “August would furnish a space in the universe where she imagined she [Jedda] could have been; at twenty Jedda was at a faraway university, at thirty she was expecting her first child in the city. Or sometimes she’d just say she was dead. Life or death have finality, limbo doesn’t; no one wants to hear about someone lost. Someone that just went and disappeared altogether” (29).

It might have been no coincidence that Tara June Winch made August move to England of all the places in the world. This subtle yet profound allegory of the British Empire and its impact on Aboriginal identity can be understood as the author denouncing that colonialism still affects Indigenous communities to this day. August was heartbroken and lost in a place that was supposed to keep her safe. This sense of displacement in her own home was fueled by the same system that segregated her grandfather (and her ancestors before that) and questioned her



integrity. By the end of the novel, what August considered home (her family, her country, her language) was fundamentally the “binary opposition” (Ashcroft et al., “Post-Colonial Studies” 18) of what she thought she was looking for in England. The fact that London represents the continuation of the protagonist’s mental downfall regarding her sense of self and that Australia, more specifically *Ngurambang*, is seen as a new chapter in her journey of self-discovery makes the reader reflect upon the effects imperial and colonial powers had over Aboriginal peoples.

## 5.2. The Importance of Communities in Aboriginal Cultures

One of the main struggles the protagonist goes through in the novel is the fact that she has to come back home after years of being away. As traumatic as it was for August, she soon learned that the place she calls home can be associated with positive aspects of her life. The definition of “home” is first explored by Albert through the entry corresponding with *dhaganhu ngurambang?* which means *where is your country?* in English. The answer, turns out, is more than a geographical location in a map: “When our people say *Where is your country*, they are asking something deeper. *Who is your family? Who are you related to? Are we related?*” (Winch 34). The concept of home being “something deeper” is directly related to how Indigenous peoples feel about their cultural connections and communities. The *Victorian Public Sector Commission*, in their publication entitled “Aboriginal Culture and History,” explain the system in which Aboriginal communities see themselves individually and as a collective:

Aboriginal people view individuals within a community holistically. Aboriginal understanding of the individual is in relation to the family, the community, the tribe, the land and the spiritual beings of the lore and dreaming. A person’s physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural needs and well-being are intrinsically linked—they cannot be isolated. The person is not seen as separate, but in relationship to and with others.

Bearing in mind how important it is to stay (inter)connected in Aboriginal cultures, it is no surprise that August feels at a loss regarding her home and identity. The fact that she denied her Aboriginality for the majority of her life affected her relationship both with her community and with herself: “she felt as if she were back home, back on the land she belonged to. At the same time, she thought that this was the saddest place on earth” (Winch 163). It must not have been easy for the protagonist to come into terms with a part of herself that she wanted nothing to do with for almost all her life (. Part of accepting herself meant accepting her family, her home, her land, her missing sister and her struggles as an Aboriginal woman. There is one particular scene in the novel — the dance of the brolga — where she feels how her body, spirit and mind are more connected to her Aboriginality than ever:

A few family members pointed in the direction of the dam where the red bonnet of the brolga rose and fell, and its white and blue-grey feathers opened and collapsed. At the edge of the water, with its stick-thin, sinewy legs and dipping knees, it danced. It flapped its wings, showing its black underside. When it bowed its head August thought she could see its yellow eye. It had a trumpet call, its caw rising, rising. Then its beak dipped right down to the ground – and up, up its wings went, the long body of the bird rose, its legs cycling in the air before it fell again. As the brolga hit the ground, a wing, then the other, whooshed into the smoke blowing in the field. One leg up, and then the other leg joined so that the brolga was airborne for a moment, and then as its body, atoms, molecules joined the ground its head rose up with the billow of dust, rising. Over and over, the brolga repeated the dance. There was music. Everyone was still, watching – seeing suddenly not the freedom of the bird, but its belonging. She dropped to her knees and sobbed and wailed like she’d never done before. August saw something else in the bird,

too. Her legs felt heavy and she fell where she stood, kept her eyes on the bird. *Jedda*, she thought, *Jedda*. (159)

In this scene August is beginning to comprehend that being Aboriginal is understanding that everything is intersected. This is the moment where she begins her journey of introspection and self-discovery, when she slowly starts to let go of the past and starts to focus on her identity. Her journey is not linear, she has ups and downs, moments when she questions her family, her roots and even her main goal throughout the novel: finding her grandfather's unfinished dictionary. Albert, who also had to make peace with his Aboriginal self, states very early on in the novel that his family has been, for years, lost: "The Gondiwindi have been like that, scattered children without the thing that nourishes them, without a compass to get back home" (105). The fact that August can break with stereotypes and finds a way to fit in and validate her Aboriginality with the help of her family indicates that she is in the right path regarding her relationship with her identity. In a certain way, August's initial short trip home is, as the reader finds out later on in the book, what motivates her to reconsider her place in Massacre Plains as well as her purpose in life.

## 6. CONNECTION TO LAND

*The Yield* starts with Albert Gondiwindi narrating the reason why he decided to compile a dictionary of Wiradjuri terms. On the first paragraph, he encourages the reader to pronounce the word *Ngurambang*, the meaning of which the reader will not find out until the end of the book: "I was born on *Ngurambang* — can you hear it? — *Ngu-am-bang*. If you say it right it hits the back of your mouth and you should taste blood in your words" (1). Albert, as well as his family, have a strong connection to the place they live and the land they are part of. Due to colonial policies, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, in this case the Wiradjuri, were unable to continue

exercising their rights and their Aboriginality in relation to their land. In Winch's novel the issues regarding the Wiradjuri's relationship with their Country and the fight to get their lands back is explored in Albert's dictionary as well as in August's response to the mining company in her town.

### 6.1. Spirituality and Land

In order to understand how important the connection between spirituality and land is to the Aboriginal communities of Australia, it has to be taken into consideration that these notions cannot be separated, as Victoria Grieves explains:

Aboriginal Spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. These relations and the knowledge of how they are interconnected are expressed, and why it is important to keep all things in healthy interdependence is encoded, in sacred stories or myths. (8)

In *The Yield* this interconnectedness of people, spirit, and land is seen in many entries of Albert's dictionary. Most of the things he learns throughout his life that involve his aboriginality has to do with teachings from what he calls "the ancestors." Albert describes, in more than one occasion, that he is able to "travel" with the ancestors and that they usually instruct him on important aspects of his identity. This could be interpreted as Albert being connected with the Dreaming, which is an extremely complex concept. *Artlandish*, in their publication entitled "Understanding Aboriginal Dreamings," describe the following: "Aboriginal people disclose their Dreaming stories to pass on imperative knowledge, cultural values, traditions and law to future generations." In the case of Albert, his ancestors might have been using the Dreaming to

communicate with him as well as to educate him on aspects of Aboriginality that he was missing due to the fact that he was taken away from his family. For Albert, the Dreaming was a sort of channel where he could be interconnected with his culture, his language, and his ancestor's teachings.

When he was a child, Albert came in contact with nature solely through his Dreaming due to the fact that he was taken away from his family and placed on a boy's home. One of the many times he was offered knowledge in relation to nature, he was told what a *yulumbang* (acacia tree in English) was: "They [the ancestors] told me that the plants were pregnant with seeds, that the plants were our mothers and so I was only to use them for the Gondiwindi, not for selling, just for living. Remember that, wherever you go and touch the trees and plants, they are sacred" (Winch 32). The ancestors helped Albert to accept his identity as an Aboriginal man because, thanks to them, he came in contact with situations in life that he would have been as a result of his situation in the boarding school. Another interesting fact about the ancestor's teachings is how different to colonial ideals they are: "If you eat the fish, it's important to know how to treat it after it's died for you" (45). The idea that the fish died *for* you shows a great respect to living beings in general, which is the contrary to colonial practices. Honoring animals and plants before consuming them and believing that "all living things— are alive with ancestors, with spirits" (182) shaped Albert's identity and the way he perceived himself in the world.

## 6.2. The Mining Company: A Contemporary Form of Colonization

Aboriginal land has been robbed from their original custodians since Australia was invaded and the process of colonization began. In *The Yield* the protagonist's childhood home, Prosperous House, is about to be demolished because of a mining company that was granted permission to excavate the zone. Throughout the book, the reader feels the impending presence

of a bomb ticking and about to explode, but this ends up being put aside in order to focus on other stories. This perpetual feeling that something wrong is about to happen provides the novel with a sensation that, if the matter regarding the mine is left unattended, everything is going to fall apart. In addition to this, there is a parallelism between the European settlers and the mining company due to the fact that, in both these cases, they were unlawfully trying to loot Indigenous land. Even though August is informed of this situation very early on in the novel, it is not until the end that this issue unfolds.

August, once again, is faced with the possibility of loss: losing Prosperous House, losing her grandmother, losing her language, losing her home and losing her identity. This time, instead of running away like the last time, she is determined, much like her family, to stop the mining company. In order to do this, she joins a group of environmental activists and gets to know Mandy, who is deeply involved in bringing the mining to an end:

“we are all migrants here, even those first-fleet descendants; we forget that we’re all in someone else’s country. And too often we don’t have the vision, the respect, to bother learning the native language! To even learn to respect the culture where we live.”

“Because it doesn’t make life easier?” August asked.

“Because we have to learn it’s personal — we learn that through looking after the land. That we’ll all continue not really having a collective identity unless we take a long and hard look back and accept the past and try to save the land we live in...that’s what I think” (291)

The mine could be understood as part of the vestiges of colonization. The mining company decided that, for some reason, this specific place in New South Wales was the best to carry out the mining and was immediately backed up by the government. It is easy to see how straightforward this decision was made and how unimportant the community (especially the

Aboriginal peoples) of Massacre Plains was to the company. One cannot help but compare this with the arrival of the British Empire and the displacement and subsequent abuse the First Nations of Australia: “They want to take land that wasn’t theirs to take, land given that wasn’t theirs to give” (286). In the case of *The Yield*, the mine was a 21<sup>st</sup> century not-so-subtle form of neo-colonization.

At the end, August’s family resolves to join the protests and chain themselves to a fence, resulting in a chaotic interaction with the police force. In a certain way, the protagonist feels connected to this cause and rediscovers her sense of belonging to Massacre Plains and a strong bond to her Aboriginality: “She felt hole, fighting for something, screaming in the field rather than eating it, tasting it, running away” (294). What is important about this scene is that August is finally able to let go of the past and focus on a future that involves celebrating who she is. Land, as explained before, is crucial to understand how Indigenous communities around the world construct their life and develop their beliefs. To conclude this issue, it is important to note that Albert’s last words in relation to his land were forever imprinted in the memory of the many Aboriginal children who came in contact with his dictionary: “*Ngurambang!* Can you hear it now? Say it — *Ngu-am-bang!*” (306). By telling their story, the Gondiwindi family has shown that the end can also be the beginning.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The main objective of this dissertation was to do a close reading analysis of Tara June Winch’s novel *The Yield* followed by a postcolonial study of some of the issues encompassed in the book. I have scrutinized four issues in relation to the main theme of this paper, Aboriginal identity: language and culture, history and tradition, the act of returning home and, finally, the Indigenous peoples’ connection to land. It is not easy to conclude without saying that there is a

lot of work to do regarding the matter at hand, and that *The Yield* this is one of the many works written by Aboriginal authors that contributes to their communities' fight for a dignified life. What happened to August, Albert and the rest of their family in this story illustrates only a small part of the history of Aboriginal Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity needs to be recognized and validated in order for them to begin the long and hard process of rebuilding their communities and finding their place of belonging. After all, Australia always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In general terms, the “other” is anyone who is separate from one’s self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is “normal” and in locating one’s own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as “other” through discourses such as primitivism and cannibalism, as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view. For a more detailed explanation, see Ashcroft et al. 154-156.



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<sup>2</sup> *Terra nullius* is a Latin term meaning “land belonging to no one.” British colonization and subsequent Australian land laws were established on the claim that Australia was *terra nullius*, justifying acquisition by British occupation without treaty or payment. This effectively denied Indigenous people’s prior occupation of and connection to the land. See *Australians Together*. The Mabo Case Decision: Terra Nullius, 2021, [australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/mabo-native-title/#:~:text=Terra%20nullius%20is%20a%20Latin,occupation%20without%20treaty%20or%20payment](https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/mabo-native-title/#:~:text=Terra%20nullius%20is%20a%20Latin,occupation%20without%20treaty%20or%20payment)

<sup>3</sup> In post-colonial/colonial discourse, this term is often used to distinguish between two types of European colonies: settler (or settler-invader) colonies and colonies of occupation. (...) Examples of settler colonies where, over time, the invading Europeans (or their descendants) annihilated, displaced and/or marginalized the indigenes to become a majority non-indigenous population, include Argentina, Australia, Canada and the United States. (Ashcroft et al., “Post-Colonial Studies” 193).

<sup>4</sup> Abbreviation for Black, Indigenous, and people of color: used especially in the US to mean Black people, Indigenous American people, and other people who do not consider themselves to be White. “BIPOC.” *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, [dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/bipoc?q=BIPOC](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/bipoc?q=BIPOC)

<sup>5</sup> A phenomenon in which the descendants of a person who has experienced a terrifying event show adverse emotional and behavioral reactions to the event that are similar to those of the person himself or herself. “Intergenerational Trauma.” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, American Psychology Association, 2020, [dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma](https://dictionary.apa.org/intergenerational-trauma)

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