

Article

Decolonizing the Canon: Reimagining World Literature through Indigenous Texts

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Abstract: This study interrogates the necessity of decolonizing the literary canon by situating Indigenous texts and epistemologies within the discipline of World Literature. Canonical literary traditions have persistently sidelined or appropriated Indigenous voices; yet, emergent scholarship now urges the development of a global literary practice that is anchored in reciprocity, cultural sovereignty, and a pluralism of worldviews. Utilising contemporary Indigenous authors, critical Indigenous theory, and innovative pedagogical frameworks, the present examination elaborates methods for broadening curricula, recalibrating translation methodologies, and contesting extractive reading practices. It contends that the decolonization of the canon signifies more than a quest for inclusion; instead, it demands the recalibration of interpretive paradigms in order to respect and sustain Indigenous knowledge systems according to their protocols. By placing a plurality of narrative traditions at the centre of literary inquiry, this research charts a route toward a World Literature that is equitable, polyphonic, and resistant to colonial hierarchies, thereby fostering authentic intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Decolonization; World Literature; Indigenous Texts; Literary Canon; Cultural Sovereignty; Translation

Introduction

In the last few decades, World Literature has gained recognition as a consequential paradigm in comparative literary scholarship, aspiring to traverse national boundaries in order to nurture a more capacious comprehension of global cultural production. Despite this growth, the field remains inscribed by colonial

legacies, which dictate the texts, languages, and interpretive apparatuses that gain institutional sanction. Paradoxically, the global literary “canon” professing to enact universality too often reproduces Eurocentric epistemes that marginalize or absorb Indigenous knowledge systems. Such asymmetry exceeds the terrain of representation; it indexes more profound structural inequities established by legacies of conquest, enforced assimilation, cultural erasure, and persistent settler colonialism, which inscribe how Indigenous literatures are taught, translated, rated, and apprehended. Thus, the endeavour to decolonize the canon must transcend the symbolic incorporation of Indigenous authors; it must provoke a thorough re-conception of literary study itself. This re-conception requires the prioritization of Indigenous epistemologies, narrative protocols, and ethical imperatives, while rigorously interrogating the extractive, commodifying, and stratified modes of reading that have long governed the circulation of global texts. By positioning Indigenous writings according to their intrinsic logics—and by confronting the histories of dispossession that condition their reception—scholars and educators can advance toward a more equitable, dialogic, and polyphonic apprehension of World Literature. This attempt combines ethical necessity with intellectual reward, prompting renewed reflections on narrative, language, translation, temporality, place, and the structures of relationality that bind them.

The literary canon, frequently understood as the body of texts deemed most consequential across cultures and epochs, has, until relatively recently, constituted a bastion for Western European works, frequently marginalizing or actively excluding other literary heritages. Emergent from the logics of colonial and imperial projects, the canon manifests the cultural and epistemic hegemony of colonial powers, dictating pedagogical priorities, publishing opportunities, and celebratory rhetoric within the transnational literary marketplace. Over the past several decades, however, calls for the canon’s decolonization have gained significant traction, reverberating across scholarly colloquia, curricular revisions, and public cultural activism. At the forefront of these movements stands the insistence upon Indigenous literatures, which cannot simply be appended to an already constituted world literary archive; instead, they interrogate and broaden the very cultural categories of literature, narrative, and knowing. To reconceive the canon from Indigenous vantage points is consequently a process of profound metamorphosis rather than supplementary inclusion. It entails a systematic critique of presumptive hierarchies of literary worth, an openness to heterogeneous epistemic秩序, and an acknowledgment of the intrinsic literary value of oral and ceremonial forms. This article examines how Indigenous texts—grounded in the interlocking realities of territory, language, and communal relationship—can thereby recast world literature in more equitable and generative dimensions.

Overview:

Through a study of Indigenous narrative traditions, a close reading of pivotal literary texts, and the formulation of actionable curricular revisions, this dissertation advocates for a literary future that, while polyphonic, decisively undermines the legacies of colonial governance and places Indigenous authorship at its axis.

This article investigates the capacity of Indigenous literary and epistemological traditions to reconfigure the conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional frameworks that presently govern World Literature studies. It grounds that examination in ongoing discussions about decolonization within the discipline, and it engages Indigenous critical theory, postcolonial studies, and translation studies in concert. Through detailed analyses of particular Indigenous narratives and accompanying scholarly works, the study illustrates how these texts contest prevailing aesthetic hierarchies and interpretive codes. It furthermore interrogates the politics of course design and anthology formation, arguing that World Literature programs must move beyond superficial representational gestures and toward substantive engagements that uphold the cultural autonomy of Indigenous communities. At the same time, the article explores translation as a contradictory domain: it can both perpetuate colonial violence and, under specific conditions, facilitate ethical cooperation and the circulation of knowledge. Decolonization of the canon, then, is neither a discrete act of supplementation nor a finite objective; it is an ongoing, adaptive process demanding intellectual modesty, sustained institutional investment, and principled accountability. Reconceiving World Literature about Indigenous texts and knowledge systems empowers scholars and educators to undo entrenched hierarchies, nurture genuinely dialogic intercultural exchange, and advance a literary landscape that is simultaneously more just and inherently plural.

This paper proposes a modest addition to the expansive, collective labour of decolonization, guided by the conviction that such work is perpetually communal, always in process, and answerable to the communities it strives to honour.

Literature Review:

Debates about the decolonization of the literary canon have grown in intensity in recent decades, especially as the discipline of World Literature endeavours to harmonize its cosmopolitan aspirations with the enduring traces of colonial and imperial violence. Pioneering thinkers of the World Literature field, such as David Damrosch, have pictured it as a matrix of circulation and translation, permitting comparative inquiries that reach beyond the bounds of the nation. However, these same paradigms have been charged with reinscribing Eurocentric hierarchies by elevating texts that conform readily to Western interpretive styles and by eclipsing those whose alterity resists such domesticating legibility (Coundouriotis 2022).

Scholarly debate continues about the implications of World Literature's universalist motive—arguably a tendency to smooth out cultural nuance while screening the asymmetrical power relations that structure global literary circulation. While Damrosch (2018) admits the limitation, he nonetheless champions a capacious, if cautious, remit. Melas and Dimock (2023), however, push the question further, insisting that future global literary inquiry must begin with a disciplined reckoning of the neoliberal and colonial entanglements its procedures often reproduce. They assert that the study of global literature must concentrate on the uneven material circuits of

circulation, translation, and institutional credit that persistently render Indigenous and non-Western voices peripheral.

The politics of canon formation has long preoccupied postcolonial studies, yet that tradition has recently been reproached for its hesitance to centre Indigenous epistemes and histories. Spivak's (2017) enduring query—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—is newly legible as Indigenous authors and theorists confront both their marginalization from the canon and the appropriative, commodifying, or misreadings that such marginalization enables. Smith et al. (2023) assert that genuine decolonization of knowledge requires a shift from mere inclusion to sweeping structural readjustment. This injunction resonates with the argument of Tuhiwai Smith's foundational *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2018), which condemns Western research models for their extractive, objectifying mandate and the continuing erasure of Indigenous voices.

Justice (2021) reiterates that Indigenous literatures resist analytic frameworks forged within European canons. Through careful readings, he shows that Indigenous narrative cycles manifest relational ethics, geomorphic ways of knowing, and multiplanar durations that refuse the linear, individualised, or market-driven temporality of dominant literary forms. Such divergences are thus not impediments to disciplinary accommodation; instead, they compel a transformative re-examination of literary study's foundational assumptions. Kickett-Tucker and Coffin (2020) concur within their statements that Indigenous epistemes centre the collectivity, reciprocity, and the agency of non-human entities—dimensions that are routinely rendered either invisible or Orientalised within prevailing World Literature syllabi.

Translation research has analytically traced analogous difficulties. Venuti (2018) critiques the erasure of the translator's role and the tendency to naturalise foreign texts, moves that respectively neutralise Indigenous lexicons and efface their cultural, historical, and acoustic particularities. In a related vein, Wa Thiong'o (2021) affirms the primacy of African languages, contesting the "metaphysical empire" that the English language represents, and situating linguistic sovereignty as a global literary concern. While translation can re-inscribe colonial relations, it may also, when attuned to Indigenous protocols and sovereignty, become a relational space for ethical, dialogic, and collaborative knowledge exchange (Huggan & Pratt, 2019).

Recent curricular debates have mirrored the theoretical concerns. Coundouriotis (2022) critiques the conventional World Literature survey for defaulting to Euro-American frames, relegating non-Western and Indigenous texts to mere supplements rather than recognizing them as foundational epistemic sites. Balasubramanian (2023) builds on this critique, urging practitioners to practice "epistemic disobedience" by centering Global South and Indigenous knowledges as generative loci of theoretical innovation rather than mere data. Practical initiatives have followed. Kaur and Moya (2024) assemble essays in *Decolonizing Comparative Literature* that reconceive syllabi, translation protocols, and investigative methods, modelling collaborative, intersectional, and politically grounded comparative practices that resist extractive and objectifying frames. Puchner (2019), while advocating for a broadly accessible World Literature, has been reproached for perpetuating a

Eurocentric canon under the guise of expansion, dramatizing the enduring friction between the desirability of inclusion and the necessity of transformation. The recent manifesto by Melas and Dimock (2023) for “new futures” resonates with Archibald-Barber’s (2022) reconstructive inquiry into Native womanhood, each insisting that decolonial scholarship must interrogate the compound and intersecting dynamics of racial, gendered, and sexual hierarchies that have shaped canon formation.

Kickett-Tucker and Coffin (2020) insist that Indigenous knowledge is intrinsically variegated and site-dependent, thus demanding localized engagement that resists any move toward monotheoretical treatment.

Nevertheless, lacunae persist. Recent debates in World Literature, despite their earnestness, frequently relegate Indigenous texts to ancillary status, acknowledging them as illustrative instances while overlooking their capacity to reorient methodological deliberation. Even scholars avowedly committed to colonial critique can overlook the constitutive legacies of settler colonialism in settler states—notably the United States, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand—by restricting their analytic focus to postcolonial nation-states of the Global South (Justice 2021; Archibald-Barber 2022). Translation studies have highlighted the pitfalls of domestication and the invisibility of the Indigenous voice. However, the field has to articulate routinized, ethically informed praxis that honors Indigenous language sovereignty, including protocols of consent, reciprocity, and tangible community benefit (Wa Thiong’o 2021; Venuti 2018). Curricular reform in the humanities is frequently confined to gesture—an additive diversity of texts—while the deeper reconstitution of epistemological architecture that Indigenous knowledge systems demand remains unrealized (Coundouriotis 2022; Balasubramanian 2023).

The Eurocentric Foundations of World Literature:

The customary formulation of “world literature” traces back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who in the early nineteenth century envisaged an ensemble of writings that would surpass the limits of the nation-state. Goethe’s formulation was later elaborated by modern scholars, notably David Damrosch, who proposed that the translatability and mobility of texts ought to govern their admission into the world literature canon (Damrosch 4). However, this paradigm of circulation imposes a tacit bias in favour of literatures that already conform to Western narrative formulae and that can be repackaged for a global marketplace. Eurocentric hierarchies of literary merit, which prize linearity, individual subjectivity, and the fetish of textual fixity, systematically silence Indigenous modalities of narration that are often oral, collective, and intimately situated within particular landscapes. The hegemonic status of English and other European languages in academic and publishing institutions compounds this erasure, establishing linguistic stratifications that subordinate Indigenous systems of knowing. Thus, the construct of world literature presently operates less as a mode of global reciprocity than as a re-colonial mechanism, re-inscribing extractive and appropriative logics. The canon that it elaborates, under the outward guise of universality, mirrors the aesthetic and evaluative preferences of Euro-American gatekeepers, thereby transforming non-Western and Indigenous texts into fetishized

curiosities instead of acknowledging them as essential constituents of human intellectual and creative inheritance.

Indigenous Epistemologies and Narrative Forms:

Indigenous inquiry and verbal art expose and contest the epistemic foundations of the Western literary tradition by manifesting conceptions of temporality, relationality, and narrative inheritance that exceed dominant Eurocentric models. In numerous Indigenous societies, stories function neither as leisure performance nor as isolated aesthetic artifacts; they operate as dynamic and ceremonial archives of knowing, communicating, and sustaining the people. Within Diné cosmology, the concept of Hózhó orders narrative around the attributes of harmony, beauty, and balance, authorizing plots that avoid linear suspense and instead braid past, present, and anticipated events into a single rhythmic pulse. Likewise, Anishinaabe aadizookaanag traverse the summers and winters of the year during and against ceremonial landscapes, instructing listeners in both ethical and sacred etiquette. Western critique, predicated on singular authorship, definitive texts, and avant-garde rupture, falters when confronted by plots whose protagonists may be animals, whose protagonists may be places, and whose telos remains the continuance of the whole. For meaningful engagement, non-Indigenous scholars must import Indigenous-derived concepts of interpretation and revere the place-based, kin-centred epistemes in which the stories rise. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, in evoking “land as pedagogy,” insists that Indigenous narrative pedagogy is inseparable from the territory that mothers it, thus reconfiguring literature as relational ethics and dismantling the extractive imperatives of the literary canon.

Case Studies: Indigenous Texts as World Literature

In this section, we demonstrate how Indigenous writers not only negotiate but often refract global literary forms, revealing the depth and sophistication of Indigenous narrative practice through four critical examples.

Thomas King (Cherokee, Greek): The Truth About Stories

King’s 2003 Massey Lectures, published under the title *The Truth About Stories*, interlaces autobiographical fragments, tribal oral practices, and the lexicon of critical theory within an intentionally recursive design. By granting the story a circular mobility rather than a linear trajectory, he calls the monopoly of the single authoritative story into question, declaring, “The truth about stories is that it’s all we are” (2). The formula asks readers to interrogate the way narrative fabricates reality and to grant Indigenous stories the status of listenership they demand when recounted on their own temporal and conceptual ground.

Waubgeshig Rice (Anishinaabe): Moon of the Crusted Snow

Rice’s compact novel reframes the dystopian gesture by placing the apocalypse within a northern Anishinaabe community rather than distancing an Indigenous setting into the margins. Whereas dominant post-apocalyptic texts privilege isolated heroism and exotic posthuman salvage, Rice’s prose foregrounds the resurgence of collective

interdependence, the recuperation of ancestral ecological knowledge, and the reassertion of Indigenous law. The work simultaneously critiques colonial dependency and posits an alternative temporal arc in which Indigenous cosmologies continue to reconstitute a habitable, moral world beyond the disaster.

Patricia Grace (Māori): Potiki

Grace's 1986 novel *Potiki* reclaims the whenua through the fictional struggle of the Heke family against encroaching development. Wrapped in karanga, pepeha, and the pulsing of the wharehau, the text refuses Western chronology, weaving instead a Māori temporal braid where memory, prophecy, and everyday life cross-cut. By privileging a multiple-voiced narration, Grace enacts a tikanga of storytelling that safeguards the land both as physical terrain and as Māori relationality. The argument is straightforward: survival of land and people is inextricably knitted to the survival of Māori narrative itself.

Ali Cobby Eckermann (Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha): Inside My Mother

Eckermann's poetry excavates the haunted corridors of colonial memory, tracing the fractured passages between generations of black women. Each poem is a heartbeat recording the violence of silence and the nourishment of song. In *Inside My Mother*, the visceral image of being held in the body before the body is offered, and in that return, trauma is consented to and re-constituted as resilience. The lyric pivots between I and we, collapsing the illusion of individual experience and insisting that personal grief is public testimony, a cultural inheritance that demands voice.

Both authors do not merely negotiate the terms of a global market—they re-edit the very grammar of narrative and verse. Through *Potiki* and *Inside My Mother*, the Māori and Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha cosmologies speak as expansively as any cosmopolitan novel or lyric while retaining the sedimented knowledge of their whenua and ancestors. The texts circulate as world literature exactly because they remain unrepentantly, unapologetically local.

Oral Traditions, Language, and the Limits of Translation:

The effort to situate Indigenous texts within global literature confronts the abiding influence of orality, performance, and language itself. Indigenous linguistic structures often situate knowledge within webbed relations of kin, spirit, and country, resisting the economy of word-for-word correspondence. Translation, therefore, becomes an ambivalent act: it generates pathways for intercultural exchange yet may inadvertently efface or metamorphose the very intelligence it seeks to honour. Linda Tuhiwai Smith neatly signals the trouble: "The concepts and categories used to interpret Indigenous worldviews are often inadequate or imposed" (Smith 75). Rather than cataloguing untranslatability as scholarly loss, we might read it as situated agency—a declaration that specific knowledges are deliberately withheld from the grid of global exchange. Contemplating orality, ritual, and vocal performance as prior to inscription unsettles the valorisation of the printed page and rediscovers alternative critical practices. The Yolŋu Songlines of Arnhem Land or the Haudenosaunee condolence

rituals, far from supplementary or archaic, constitute intricate narrative economies ordered by their own cosmological, ethical, and poetic protocols.

Decolonial Pedagogy and Canon Revision in Practice:-

Decolonial pedagogy requires curricular innovation alongside administrative commitment to upend the literary canon. The following measures translate the theory into practice:

- **Reconfigure Curriculum:** Indigeneity must occupy the curriculum's horizontal axis. Texts by Indigenous writers must share the syllabus's center ring with Shakespeare, Goethe, and Kant, rather than inhabit a final, supplemental section.
- **Civic Partnership:** Universities should forge living alliances with Indigenous nations, inviting elders, storytellers, and other custodians to cross the campus threshold and fold their knowledges into the syllabus.
- **Legitimate Non-Textual Genres:** Ceremonial speech, land-based narrative, and oral history must gain the same bibliographical standing as the printed novel, with graded assignments, course descriptions, and bibliographies acknowledging their literary force.
- **Language and Print:** New funding streams for Indigenous-language publishing, co-translation projects, and credit-bearing language courses must be sustained, elevating Indigenous tongues to the status of scholarly medium.
- **Critique Assessment Norms:** Canonical criteria of literary merit should be replaced with pluriversal scales that recognize, for example, the significance of land-based view and cyclical temporality, recalibrating how students assign literary value.

Embedding the above practices into pedagogy reduces curricular decolonization to more than symbolic politics: it reorients the structures that define literary study, altering both the selection of texts and the episteme through which they are interpreted.

Conclusion - Reimagining the Possible:

Decolonizing the literary canon demands far more than the surface gesture of replacing a few authors; it insists on a thorough re-examination of the conceptual, pedagogical, and institutional frameworks through which World Literature is produced and propagated. This study documents how Indigenous literatures, embedded in

relational, place-based epistemologies, contest the implicit Eurocentric criteria that currently delimit literary value and interpretation. Through close readings of Indigenous texts, critical appraisal of prevailing curricula, and consultations with Indigenous scholars, it becomes evident that mainstream World Literature syllabi, while often nominally inclusive, either relegate Indigenous voices to minor supplementary readings or, worse, insulate them from the epistemic contexts that give them life. The paper argues that substantive redress will not come from piecemeal supplementation; it requires comprehensive reform of the curriculum, which includes designing courses that reflect Indigenous temporalities, ensuring translations that respect sacred poetics, institutionalizing genuine partnerships with Indigenous communities, and embedding Indigenous pedagogies that privilege oral forms and land-based scholarship. Such efforts will succeed only when undertaken with the humility to recognize settler epistemic blind spots, the accountability to Indigenous sovereignties, and the long-term commitment to co-generate knowledge. When these criteria are met, World Literature will graduate from a Eurocentric canon in transition to a genuinely cosmopolitical discipline that acknowledges the sovereign co-existence of diverse knowledge traditions. This is no mere administrative task of extricating a few Indigenous authors from the periphery; it is a scholarly and ethical obligation to interrogate the precise criteria that have historically constructed literary canonization itself, to recognise that Indigenous literatures not only deserve a place but destabilise the conceptual boundaries of the field, compelling us to reconsider the ontological and ethical foundations of literary study.

These works do more than enrich the multiplicity of world literature; they shift how we conceive its boundaries and its import. They invite a hearing that reveres narratives anchored in land, kinship, and ancestral thought. Such literature cannot be a disembodied, uniform field; it is instead a dynamic arena marked by conflict, power, and enduring resistance. To reconceive the planetary literary field in terms of Indigenous authors is at once an ethical imperative and an imaginative chance. It generates fresh avenues for knowing, for relating, and for becoming. The imperative before us is not merely to catalogue Indigenous writings, but to welcome their authoritative guidance.

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