

Lexical Sovereignty and the Counter Archives: Reframing Colonial Dispossession in Tara June Winch's *The Yield*

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Abstract

*This paper examines *The Yield* through a conceptual shift from land-based dispossession to what is termed lexical sovereignty—the reclamation of language as a form of territory and resistance. While existing scholarship on Indigenous literatures has predominantly foregrounded trauma, identity, and reconciliation, this study argues that such frameworks remain insufficient to capture the novel's deeper intervention. Instead, *The Yield* constructs a counter-archive in which Wiradjuri language functions not merely as cultural residue but as an active, world-making force. Drawing on settler colonial studies and decolonial theory, the paper demonstrates that dispossession in the novel operates simultaneously at material and epistemic levels, where the erosion of land is inseparable from the loss of linguistic worlds. Through close textual analysis of the novel's tripartite structure—mission records, family narrative, and the Wiradjuri dictionary—it is shown that language constitutes a parallel territorial domain that resists colonial modes of mapping and ownership. Memory, in this context, emerges not as nostalgic recall but as a relational and reconstructive practice, embedded within Indigenous lexicon. The paper further contends that *The Yield* refuses the closure implied by reconciliation discourse, offering instead a model of partial recovery grounded in linguistic persistence. By foregrounding language as both the site of dispossession and the medium of survival, this study proposes lexical sovereignty as a critical framework for rethinking Indigenous resistance beyond conventional postcolonial paradigms.*

Keywords

Lexical Sovereignty, Indigenous Language Revival, Settler Colonialism, Counter-Archive, Cultural Memory, Decolonial Theory

1. Framing the Intervention: Beyond Loss, Towards Lexical Sovereignty

Any reading of *The Yield* that remains confined to trauma or cultural recovery risks flattening the novel's deeper intervention. Tara June Winch does not merely narrate dispossession; she reconfigures the very terms through which dispossession can be understood. What is at stake is not only land, nor even memory in its familiar affective register, but something more foundational—the erosion and reclamation of *language as a condition of existence*.

Settler colonial discourse has long privileged land as its primary site of analysis. However, in *The Yield*, land is never separable from language; rather, it is *coextensive* with it. The loss of land is simultaneously the loss of the words that make that land intelligible within Indigenous epistemologies. In this sense, dispossession unfolds as a dual process: material expropriation and epistemic silencing. The novel insists that one cannot be understood without the other.

A key passage from the novel, drawn from August Gondiwindi's Wiradjuri dictionary, makes this relationship unmistakably clear:

“Ngurambang: country, camp, place, ground, earth, land, soil. Ngurambang is more than a place. Ngurambang is where you stand, where you belong, where you are known. Ngurambang is you.” (*The Yield* 56)

This is not a poetic embellishment but a conceptual rupture. The entry destabilizes the colonial separation between subject and territory. Land here is not property; it is ontology. To be dispossessed, then, is not merely to be displaced but to be rendered unintelligible within one's own world. This is where the paper positions its central intervention:

In *The Yield*, dispossession operates through the systematic erosion of linguistic worlds, while memory—encoded in Wiradjuri language—emerges as a form of what may be called “lexical sovereignty,” a counter-territorial practice that resists colonial erasure.

The term lexical sovereignty is not offered as metaphor but as method. It draws attention to how the novel's structure—particularly the interwoven dictionary—functions as an alternative archive, one that refuses the fixity and authority of colonial documentation. In doing so, Winch transforms language into a site of resistance that is neither symbolic nor supplementary but constitutive of Indigenous survival.

Conceptual Architecture: Colonialism, Dispossession, and Memory Reconfigured

To sustain this argument, the paper builds on a threefold conceptual framework, not as a conventional literature review but as a precise scaffolding for interpretation.

(a) Colonialism as Structure, Not Event

The analysis begins by situating the novel within the logic of settler colonialism as an ongoing structure rather than a completed historical episode. As Patrick Wolfe famously argued, “*settler colonialism is a structure, not an event*” (Wolfe 388). This formulation is crucial because it shifts attention away from singular moments of invasion towards enduring processes of elimination and replacement. In *The Yield*, this structural violence is embedded not only in historical references to missions and land seizures but also in the continuing marginalization of Indigenous language. The presence of Reverend Greenleaf's records exemplifies how colonial authority persists through bureaucratic inscription:

“The natives must be instructed in discipline and Christian virtue... their language is rudimentary and unsuited to the higher expressions of faith and civilisation” (*The Yield* 142).

Such statements are not incidental; they reveal how colonialism operates through epistemic hierarchies, where Indigenous languages are delegitimized in order to justify territorial control. This aligns with Lorenzo Veracini's observation that settler colonial regimes seek not only land but also the replacement of Indigenous modes of knowing (Veracini 16).

(b) Dispossession Beyond Land: The Epistemic and the Linguistic

While land remains central, the novel pushes us to reconceptualize dispossession as a multi-layered process. Edward Said's notion of cultural domination provides a useful starting point,

but Winch's narrative extends this further into what can be understood as linguistic dispossession, the systematic erosion of the very language through which reality is apprehended. Another dictionary entry illustrates this vividly:

"Yindyamarra: to live with respect, to act with honour, to show reverence, to be gentle. This is the way we were taught to live. This is what was taken when the words were taken."
(*The Yield* 87)

The final line—"This is what was taken when the words were taken"—compresses an entire history of colonial violence into a single linguistic loss. It suggests that dispossession is not complete with the seizure of land; it extends into the dismantling of ethical and relational systems embedded in language.

Here, the argument resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insight that colonial power operates by silencing subaltern voices, but it also exceeds it. In *The Yield*, the issue is not only whether the subaltern can speak, but whether the conditions of intelligibility themselves have been stripped away (Spivak 271).

(c) Memory as Counter-Archive

If colonialism produces archives that stabilize its authority, *The Yield* responds by constructing what may be called a counter-archive of memory. This is not memory as passive recollection but as active, reconstructive practice.

August's dictionary entries are not nostalgic returns to a lost past; they are acts of re-inscription, reassembling a world that colonialism sought to erase. Consider the following passage:

"I write these words so they are not forgotten. I write them so they can be found again. Each word is a story, each story a place, each place a life." (*The Yield* 101)

This articulation transforms memory into a spatial and relational practice. Words are not static units; they are repositories of lived worlds. In this sense, memory functions as a form of resistance that challenges the authority of colonial archives, which, as Michel Foucault reminds us, are always implicated in regimes of power and knowledge (Foucault 129). Moreover, this counter-archival function aligns with Aleida Assmann's distinction between storage memory and functional memory. The novel does not merely store linguistic remnants; it reactivates them, making memory a living, operative force (Assmann 98).

Reading *The Yield* as Archive: Form as Argument

To approach *The Yield* as a conventional narrative is to miss its most radical gesture. The novel is not merely telling a story; it is assembling an archive but one that refuses the authority, order, and violence of colonial archival systems. Its tripartite structure—August Gondiwindi's Wiradjuri dictionary, Reverend Greenleaf's mission records, and Albert Gondiwindi's contemporary narrative—must be read not as parallel **strands but as** competing epistemic regimes.

The colonial archive, represented through Greenleaf's journals, is structured by hierarchy, classification, and control. It produces knowledge in order to administer, to discipline, and ultimately to erase. Consider the tone and authority embedded in one such passage:

The Aborigines, though resistant at first, are gradually submitting to the routines of the mission. Their language, a barrier to progress, must be replaced with proper English instruction if they are to be civilised" (*The Yield* 139).

The violence here is subtle but absolute. Language is framed as an obstacle, and its erasure becomes a prerequisite for "progress." This is precisely what Michel Foucault identifies as the function of the archive—not merely to record reality but to produce regimes of truth that sustain power (Foucault 129). Greenleaf's writing does not describe dispossession; it actively participates in it.

Against this, August's dictionary emerges as a counter-form. At first glance, it appears to mimic the structure of Western lexicography—alphabetical, ordered, systematic. Yet this resemblance is deceptive. The dictionary refuses reduction; each word expands into memory, story, and place. It resists the colonial impulse to fix meaning. A revealing entry reads:

Bila: *river.*
The bila runs through us, not we through it. It carries the stories of our people, the bends and turns of our lives. When the river is taken, the stories cannot flow the same way again." (*The Yield* 62)

Here, definition dissolves into relation. The river is not an object but a living continuum of memory. The form itself becomes insurgent: the dictionary ceases to classify and instead begins to remember.

This is where the novel's structural innovation becomes clear. It does not reject the archive; it retools it from within. In doing so, it aligns with what Ann Laura Stoler calls a "reading along the archival grain," where the archive is not discarded but critically reoriented to expose its limits and silences (Stoler 20). However, Winch goes further—she constructs an alternative archival logic, one grounded in relationality rather than authority.

Land as Text, Text as Land: Reconfiguring Territory

If the novel operates as an archive, it simultaneously compels us to rethink the relationship between land and textuality. In colonial discourse, land is mapped, measured, and owned; it is rendered legible through systems of survey and documentation. In *The Yield*, however, land is not something to be written *about*—it is something that is written through language itself. The Wiradjuri words in August's dictionary function as coordinates of a living geography. Each entry is not a detached definition but an inscription of place, memory, and belonging. Consider the following passage:

Dharrang: tree.

The dharrang stands where our old people stood. Its roots are deep with memory. When you speak its name, you call back those who walked before you. Without the word, the tree is just wood. With it, it is kin.” (*The Yield* 74)

What is at stake here is not metaphor but ontology. The tree exists differently depending on whether it is named within Indigenous language. Without the word, it is reduced to an object; with it, it becomes part of a relational network of kinship and memory. This is precisely the point at which dispossession exceeds material theft—it becomes a crisis of intelligibility. This insight resonates with Edward Casey’s argument that place is not merely a location but an event of experience, constituted through memory and naming (Casey 189). In *The Yield*, language is the medium through which place comes into being. To lose the language is to lose **the** conditions under which land can be inhabited meaningfully.

Albert’s narrative reinforces this disjunction between colonial and Indigenous understandings of land. Reflecting on the legal battle over his family’s property, he observes:

They had maps and papers, lines drawn across our country like it meant something to them. But those lines didn’t tell the story of the land. They didn’t know where the old people walked, where the songs were, where the words belonged” (*The Yield* 215).

The critique here is sharp: colonial cartography reduces land to abstract space, stripping it of its narrative and relational depth. This aligns with J. B. Harley’s argument that maps are not neutral representations but instruments of power, encoding the interests of those who produce them (Harley 278).

By contrast, the Wiradjuri lexicon functions as an alternative mapping system—one that does not impose boundaries **but** traces connections. Each word is a point in a شبكة of relations, linking people, places, and histories. In this sense, the dictionary is not supplementary to the land; it **is** coextensive with it. Another entry underscores this inseparability:

“*Gawaymbanha: to return.*

Not just to come back, but to be brought back by the land itself. The land remembers you, even when you have forgotten how to remember it.” (*The Yield* 119)

Return here is not an act of individual will but a relational process mediated by land and memory. The passage subtly reverses the logic of possession: it is not the people who own the land, but the land that claims and recalls its people.

This reconfiguration challenges the foundational assumptions of colonial property regimes. As Patrick Wolfe argues, settler colonialism depends on the transformation of land into property, a process that requires the erasure of Indigenous relationships to place (Wolfe 388). *The Yield* resists this transformation by insisting that land cannot be reduced to property because it is already embedded in a شبكة of linguistic and mnemonic relations.

Language as Territory: Toward Lexical Sovereignty

If the previous sections have established that *The Yield* operates as a counter-archive and that land is inseparable from language, the argument must now move to its most decisive claim:

language in the novel is not descriptive of territory—it is itself territorial. This is the point at which the concept of *lexical sovereignty* becomes fully operative.

In *The Yield*, Wiradjuri words do not merely signify objects or experiences; **they** instantiate worlds. Each word functions as a site of belonging, a coordinate of identity, and a repository of collective memory. The dictionary, therefore, is not an ancillary device but a reconstitution of country in linguistic form. One of the most striking events makes this ontological claim explicit:

“Gulambali: to speak, to tell.

But this is not just speaking. This is speaking that makes things real. When we speak the word, we bring the thing into being again. Without the word, it fades. Without the word, it is lost.” (*The Yield* 133)

This passage articulates a profound epistemic reversal. Language is not secondary to reality; it is constitutive of it. The disappearance of words is therefore not a symbolic loss but an ontological one—the fading of entire modes of existence. This is precisely why dispossession, in the novel, must be understood as linguistic before it is territorial.

Such a position finds resonance in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence that language is “a carrier of culture” and that its erosion entails the dismantling of a people's world (Ngũgĩ 16). However, *The Yield* pushes this insight further: language is not merely a carrier, it is a form of land itself, a terrain upon which identity and memory are inscribed. Another episode intensifies this claim:

Winhangagigilanha: to remember, to know, to think.

This is not memory as you might know it. This is knowing that lives in the body, in the ground, in the word. When you lose the word, you lose the knowing. When you lose the knowing, you lose yourself.” (*The Yield* 149)

Here, memory, knowledge, and identity collapse into a single linguistic act. The loss of language becomes indistinguishable from the loss of self. This is the conceptual core of *lexical sovereignty*: to reclaim language is to reclaim the very conditions of existence.

At this juncture, the novel implicitly challenges dominant theoretical paradigms within Postcolonial Studies. While postcolonial theory has long emphasized hybridity and negotiation, Winch's text insists on something more radical: the non-negotiable centrality of Indigenous language as a sovereign domain. It is not a space of compromise but of irreducible difference.

Memory Against the Archive: Rewriting the Conditions of Knowledge

If language constitutes territory, memory becomes the means through which that territory is sustained and reactivated. However, *The Yield* does not present memory as a stable repository of the past. Instead, it stages memory as a dynamic, contested process that directly confronts the authority of colonial archives.

Reverend Greenleaf's records exemplify the logic of colonial memory: linear, authoritative, and exclusionary. They produce a version of history that is legible within colonial frameworks while systematically erasing Indigenous perspectives. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues,

power operates not only in the making of history but in the production of what counts as history (Trouillot 26). Against this, August's dictionary enacts a radically different form of remembering—one that is fragmented, relational, and embodied. Consider the following passage:

These words are all I have left of my people. But they are not small things. Each one holds a life. Each one holds a place. When I write them down, I am not preserving them—I am bringing them back. (*The Yield* 102)

The distinction here is crucial. August does not “preserve” language as an object of the past; she reanimates it as a living force. Memory becomes an act of return, not to a static origin but to a continuum of presence. This aligns with Aleida Assmann's notion of functional memory, which emphasizes the active, present-oriented use of the past (Assmann 98). Yet, once again, the novel exceeds theoretical frameworks by embedding memory directly within language itself. Words are not containers of memory; they are its very substance.

Albert's narrative further complicates this dynamic. His estrangement from his heritage reflects the broader effects of linguistic dispossession. Yet his gradual engagement with August's dictionary marks a process of relearning memory through language:

I didn't know the words, not really. They sat there on the page like something I should understand but didn't. But the more I read, the more I felt something shift, like the land was speaking through them, like it was calling me back (*The Yield* 228).

This moment is not merely personal; it is structural. It demonstrates how memory, mediated through language, can reconstitute a relationship to land that colonialism sought to sever. Memory here is not backward-looking; it is generative, producing new forms of connection and belonging.

Refusal and Return: The Politics of Incompleteness

The final movement of the novel—and of this argument—must be understood through the dual lens of refusal and return. Importantly, *The Yield* does not offer a narrative of complete recovery. The losses it documents are neither fully reversible nor easily reconciled. Instead, the novel insists on a form of return that is partial, fragile, and ongoing.

This is where the text aligns with Audra Simpson's concept of refusal—the idea that Indigenous resistance often takes the form of withholding full intelligibility within colonial frameworks (Simpson 11). In *The Yield*, this refusal is enacted through the persistence of Wiradjuri language, which resists translation and assimilation. A poignant passage captures this tension:

There are words here that cannot be translated. Words that do not fit into English, that do not belong there. They stay as they are, holding their meaning close, refusing to be changed (*The Yield* 187).

This refusal is not a limitation but a strategy. It preserves the integrity of Indigenous epistemologies by resisting their absorption into colonial systems of knowledge. At the same time, it underscores the incompleteness of any attempt to fully recover what has been lost.

Yet, alongside refusal, the novel articulates a form of return—one that is neither nostalgic nor totalizing. The act of reading, writing, and speaking Wiradjuri becomes a way of re-entering a relationship with land and memory, even if that relationship remains fractured. The closing movement of the dictionary gestures toward this possibility:

Ngawa: to see, to understand.

Not everything can be brought back. But some things can. The words are still here. The land is still here. If we listen, if we speak, we can find our way again. (*The Yield* 310)

This is not reconciliation in the conventional sense. It is a measured, conditional return, grounded in the persistence of language and memory. The novel refuses closure, insisting instead on an ongoing process of reclamation that resists both despair and easy resolution.

Methodological Signature: Reading for Sovereignty, Not Symbolism

What ultimately distinguishes this paper is not only its argument but its methodological stance. Too often, readings of *The Yield* treat Indigenous language as symbolic texture—an aesthetic marker of authenticity rather than a material site of meaning-making. This paper refuses that tendency.

Instead, it adopts a language-centred close reading, where Wiradjuri words are treated as ontological anchors rather than decorative insertions. The method proceeds on three interlinked premises:

- **Language is material:** it produces worlds rather than describing them
- **Form is argument:** the dictionary structure is not stylistic but epistemological
- **Reading is relational:** interpretation must remain attentive to the limits of translation

This approach draws selectively from Decolonial Theory while resisting its occasional abstraction. As Walter D. Mignolo argues, decolonial work requires a shift from interpreting the world to delinking from colonial epistemologies (Mignolo 9). Yet *The Yield* demonstrates that such delinking is not achieved through theoretical proclamation alone but through linguistic practice—through the sustained presence of Wiradjuri words that exceed colonial frameworks of understanding. A key passage illustrates this methodological demand:

Some words you will not understand. That is not because they are incomplete, but because they are not meant to be understood in the way you expect. They belong to a different way of knowing (*The Yield* 165).

This statement functions almost as an instruction to the reader—and, by extension, to the critic. It requires a mode of reading that does not seek to fully assimilate the text into familiar interpretive frameworks but instead acknowledges the limits of its own comprehension. In this sense, the method is not only analytical but also ethical.

Historiographical Positioning: Beyond Trauma, Identity, and Reconciliation

For the paper to register as a genuine scholarly intervention, it must clearly position itself against existing interpretive tendencies. Broadly speaking, readings of Indigenous literature—and of *The Yield* in particular—have often gravitated toward three dominant frameworks:

(i) Trauma-Centric Readings

These readings foreground historical violence and intergenerational suffering. While undeniably important, they risk reducing Indigenous texts to narratives of victimhood. As Cathy Caruth suggests, trauma narratives often hinge on the impossibility of fully representing loss (Caruth 4). However, *The Yield* does not remain within this impasse. It moves beyond trauma toward reconstruction through language. A passage from the novel underscores this shift:

What was taken from us was not just land, not just lives. It was the words that made those lives make sense. And yet here they are again, not whole, but not gone either (The Yield 204).

The emphasis here is not solely on loss but on partial recovery, mediated through language. This paper, therefore, acknowledges trauma but refuses to let it define the interpretive horizon.

(ii) Identity-Centred Readings

Another tendency is to frame the novel primarily in terms of Indigenous identity formation. While such readings highlight important questions of belonging and selfhood, they often treat identity as a stable category to be rediscovered. Drawing on Stuart Hall, identity is better understood as a process of becoming rather than a fixed essence (Hall 225). *The Yield* complicates this further by showing that identity is inseparable from language. Without linguistic continuity, identity itself becomes fractured. As Albert reflects:

I thought I knew who I was. But without the words, it felt like something was missing, like I was standing on land I couldn't fully see (The Yield 231).

This paper shifts the focus from identity as an endpoint to language as the condition that makes identity possible at all.

(iii) Reconciliation Discourse

A third interpretive frame situates the novel within broader narratives of reconciliation, particularly in settler colonial contexts like Australia. While reconciliation emphasizes dialogue and healing, it often presumes a closure that the text itself resists.

As Glen Sean Coulthard argues, state-led reconciliation can reproduce colonial power by seeking to manage Indigenous difference rather than dismantle it (Coulthard 25). *The Yield* aligns with this critique by refusing a neat resolution. A telling passage reads:

They want a story that ends well, something they can understand. But our story doesn't end like that. It keeps going, with gaps, with silences, with things that cannot be fixed (The Yield 298).

This refusal of closure is central to the novel's politics. It insists that dispossession cannot be fully undone and that any return remains incomplete and contested.

Concluding Claim: Language as the Last Territory

Having traced the interplay of colonialism, dispossession, and memory through the lens of language, the paper arrives at its final and most decisive claim that *The Yield* does not merely narrate the loss of land; it reveals that the most profound form of dispossession occurs at the level of language, where entire worlds are rendered unintelligible. Yet it is within this same linguistic domain that resistance emerges. Through the reconstruction of Wiradjuri words as a living archive, the novel transforms language into a form of territory—one that cannot be easily mapped, owned, or erased. In this sense, lexical sovereignty becomes both a mode of survival and a refusal of colonial closure.

This claim reframes the stakes of the novel. Land, while central, is no longer the sole or even primary site of struggle. Instead, the focus shifts to meaning itself—to the words through which land, memory, and identity are constituted. The closing lines of the novel encapsulate this vision:

The words are not all here. Some are gone. But enough remain. Enough to remember. Enough to speak. Enough to begin again (*The Yield* 312).

The repetition of “*enough*” is significant. It signals neither completeness nor absence but a threshold of possibility. What remains is sufficient not to restore the past in its entirety but to reimagine a future grounded in linguistic continuity. What this paper ultimately offers is not just a reading of *The Yield*, but a reorientation of how dispossession is theorized. By foregrounding language as both the site of loss and the medium of resistance, it moves beyond established frameworks and proposes a new critical vocabulary—lexical sovereignty, through which Indigenous texts can be understood.

Optional Edge: Environmental and Comparative Resonance

To extend the paper’s reach without diluting its focus, a brief gesture can be made toward the environmental humanities. The novel’s insistence on land as a living, relational entity aligns with emerging critiques of anthropocentric thought. As Timothy Morton argues, ecological thinking requires a shift away from viewing nature as an object toward understanding it as an interconnected mesh of relations (Morton 28). *The Yield* anticipates this shift by embedding ecological knowledge within language itself. At the same time, a restrained comparative note could gesture toward other Indigenous texts that foreground language revival. However, such comparison should remain suggestive rather than expansive, ensuring that the analytical centre remains firmly on Winch’s novel.

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