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Decolonising American Literature: Reflections on Readings, Postgraduate Research, and Praxis

Jessica Mure

ABSTRACT:

The field of Literature has an important role to play in the decolonisation of national identities and cultural discourses. My own postgraduate research interrogates whether decolonising American literature - by centering Indigenous and Chinese/-American migrant/diaspora voices - can contribute to a broader cultural decolonisation. In this chapter, I extrapolate how particular reading approaches and analytical frameworks of my research can be implemented as tools to decolonise the American literary canon, which can serve as a contributing factor to decolonising the national identity. The American literary canon is reflective of the contemporary political and social settings which have informed the national identity and associated 'myths of nation'. Here, a disruption of this canonical writing is discussed in terms of postcolonial literary theory, and my analysis of journey and historical narratives within the texts *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *Homebase* by Shawn Wong. This chapter also explores the personal development which coincides with engaging in postcolonial research practices. This individual reflection is a necessary component of moving beyond 'post' in praxis, enabling researchers to create tangible decolonial outcomes and futures.

KEYWORDS:

1. American
2. Literature
3. Postcolonial
4. Theory
5. Decolonial
6. Identity
7. Research
8. Praxis
9. Reflection

Introduction

Unless otherwise stated, within this chapter the terms 'American', 'Indigenous', 'settler', 'dominant discourse', and 'dominant culture' are all used in reference to United States contexts of people, culture, literature, and history. 'Texts' refers to the specific named novels that I am researching.

This chapter is written from the perspective of a PhD student researching American Literature and how it intersects with wider contexts of American identity. The Indigenous American texts I have been researching and analysing are: *The Way to Rainy Mountain* by author N. Scott Momaday, a member of the Kiowa tribe, and *Ceremony* by author Leslie Marmon Silko, of Laguna Pueblo, Mexican, and white ancestry. [1] The Chinese American texts are *Homebase* by Shawn Wong, and *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan. The lens applied to these texts has been that of postcolonial theory, particularly as it exists within literary theories and cultural studies. This chapter will briefly discuss fragments of how my usage of postcolonial theory has matured into a decolonial analysis, focusing on *Homebase* and *Ceremony*. It will also discuss self-reflection as an element of decolonial PhD research.

After engaging at length with postcolonial literary theory, it became clear that there was a separation between research approaches which focused on the devastating impact of colonialism, and those which sought theories and methods of how to move from this state of 'post-' and into an active 'de-' colonial within our discipline. Where postcolonial literary theory has 'raised awareness' of colonial structures and oppressions, the decolonial, or, in some areas, now anticolonial movement, uses this awareness to implement systemic change. Within the discipline of Literature, I envisage this as primarily a pursuit of influencing cultural change as a means to achieve decolonisation.

This approach is to acknowledge that a country's national identity is (partially) formed from a country's dominant cultural discourses, and that this culture is (partially) informed by the country's literature/authors/publications. A national identity is also created from a country's history and timeline of major sociopolitical events. Often, a nation's literature and history can be intertwined. A key question my research has posed is whether it is possible for the American national identity and culture to be decolonised through an analysis of literature

[1] Mindful of preferred language, the words I have used here to introduce the authors and denote that they are Kiowa and Laguna Pueblo people is the same as it appears in their texts.

written by those from the nation's margins, and as such, through a rewriting of the American literary canon.

A nation's identity is shaped by its dominant cultural discourses, which are, in part, informed by its literature and canonical texts. Many of America's literary behemoths have examined various major economic and cultural events of America's history. Whilst many have produced great works of art, the authors enshrined in America's literary canon are overwhelmingly white (and male). Some such examples are F. Scott Fitzgerald's teardown of the Jazz Age in *The Great Gatsby;* John Steinbeck's working-class perspective of The Great Depression, *Of Mice and Men*; and Bret Easton Ellis' brutal take on Generation X's apathy in *Less Than Zero*. This is of course hardly an exhaustive list, but it broadly illustrates that despite America's inherent diversity, the nation's literary canon has historically reinforced a colonial identity.

The hegemony embedded in America's cultural narratives is evident in contemporary politics, such as the 2025 pardons of Capitol Hill rioters (Reuters, 2025) - an event which exemplified white anxiety over declining dominance (Packer, 2021, pp. 61-139). My thesis examines the crucial Indigenous (Kiowa and Laguna Pueblo) and migrant and diaspora (Chinese-/American) perspectives on identity that are provided in the texts I selected for research. These viewpoints offer counter-narratives that challenge long-standing power structures, contributing to a decolonial revision of American identity, and this emergent process is something I will touch on in this chapter.

A cultural change where I see Literature can participate in creating decolonial futures is amongst that of reshaping historical narratives. Questions arise about who has written America's history as the dominant culture perceives it, and, about how the literary intervenes in this traditionally colonial practice. The education provided by reading historically marginalised fiction reaches beyond 'raising awareness', and towards restructuring some of the pillars which create our cultural and social contexts and discourses. In this regard, Indigenous and migrant/diaspora literatures also shift the centre and introduce their own epistemologies through narrative, form, and structure. This chapter explores how such shifts occur, and their implications for redefining the American literary canon.

Part One: Literature as a tool to decolonise historical narratives

It can be felt amongst Literature academics that our subject is perceived as woolly and purely theoretical, as we are involved in examining the interpretative and *'cultural'*. It is true that it is easy within Literature to remain stuck in a state of 'raising awareness', circulating book recommendations to friends, and feel that it is an overwhelming challenge to affect the direction of Literature's travel and its influence. The impact on an individual in response to a novel and/or postcolonial literary theory is a hugely positive experience, but as my research has progressed, I have been wrestling with how this feeling can be articulated and translated into practice, so that it may become a decolonisation of Literature, and therefore, a decolonisation of national identity.

Upon my first readings of *Homebase* and *Ceremony*, it quickly became apparent that these texts were seeking to educate the reader about particular events in Chinese migrant history and Laguna Pueblo history respectively. However, these novels do not simply state facts which are not common knowledge, or not taught widely in the United States' school curricula. On postcolonial novels and literary theory, Bill Ashcroft et al state:

> "[They] deliberately set out to disrupt European notions of 'history' and the ordering of time… [Some] run European history aground in a new and overwhelming space which annihilates time and imperial purpose… the perspective changes to that of the 'Other'." (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p. 33)

As highly skilled workers of fiction, Wong and Marmon Silko use their artistic form to reimagine and reclaim some integral features of the American historical identity narrative, and expose these histories for their emotional, rather than factual, impact. Furthermore, Stuart Hall, sociologist and cultural theorist, writes:

> "Our lives have been transformed by the struggle of the margins to come into representation – not just to be placed by a dominant, imperializing regime but to reclaim some form of representation for themselves… the subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories." (Hall, 1997, pp. 183-184)

Hall demonstrates a link between a country's 'authorised' and 'official' history, and the country's national identity – the identity which in turn defines the citizen(s). Hall's approach can be effectively applied in conjunction with postcolonial literary theory to create a decolonial reading approach. This interdisciplinarity of literary theory and Sociology/Cultural

Studies theories is the basis of my methodology; the snippets of analysis that follow here are small examples of one way in which this produces a decolonial reading of the texts.

Homebase

Shawn Wong's *Homebase* is a blend of imagination and fact, utilising the novel as a tool to define to its full extent. The protagonist, Rainsford Chan, turns to his own memory, in combination with the imagined voices of his grandfather and great-grandfather's memories, to create a literal and figurative place in American history. The narrative voice shifts, at times seamlessly, between the three different men. This blurs the origin of who exactly is speaking this familial heritage into existence. Through Rainsford's interweaving minds and voices, the reader is immersed in the lives of the Chinese migrants who constructed the infrastructure of the Central Pacific Railroad in the late 19th Century. Encouraged to emigrate to America to be a part of this manual labour workforce, the Chinese men who built this essential part of America's transport system were discriminated against in a number of ways, and their contributions have been left largely obscured amongst what is deemed official history (Angel Island Conservancy, 2024).

Wong's construction of the novel must be considered, as he made a choice as author to have all of these narratives 'channelled' through Rainsford's thoughts. This choice is significant, as it demonstrates two elements of decolonial writing. Firstly, the necessary act of having to largely imagine your family history and identity within a country, as that history, and therefore identity, have been concealed by the dominant discourse. Secondly, Wong's textual choice is also a powerful comment on myths of nation as exactly that – imagined. *Homebase* both raises the profile of the Chinese migrant/diaspora community in America, and, equalises it with that of the dominant culture by presenting this history and identity as concurrently just as present *and* imagined as theirs. This disintegrates any implied hierarchies of cultures or ethnicities, and their associated histories and identities. Wong removes this historical powerplay as *he* takes up the mantle of inscribing history, demonstrating that Chinese American identity has roots (from the Grandfather figures), dominion (from their physical and emotional toil), and a future (in Rainsford, who lives in contemporary California). Wong's novel strives forward to name this identity, irrespective of how the dominant culture tried to cauterise this identity by burying this 'hidden history' and racialised suffering. *Homebase* quite literally raises this, as we read:

> "…unemployed white laborers forced the passage of laws prohibiting the Chinese from working at certain jobs, in certain areas, and finally with the Exclusion Acts… The Chinese laborers were rounded up and taken back to Chinatown, San Francisco. And if they couldn't be taken back to Chinatown to stay, they were buried where they stood their ground. Great-Grandfather… left a trail of friends lying in the mountains." (Wong, 1989, pp. 15-16)

If approaching this with a decolonial lens, we see not only fact (the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act) and violence, but also the damaging emotional loss for a well-established diasporic community. By intervening in the history of the Central Pacific Railroad, Wong also challenges the image of the Frontier, a major archetype of 'traditional' American history and identity. Wong's Frontier is not the Caucasian settler success story of conquering a vast landscape. It is violently and emotionally racist, exploitative, and a denial of identity for those who gave their lives for its industrial advancement.

Ceremony

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* constructs an intricate narrative around one character. Tayo is a man of Laguna Pueblo and white heritage, who has returned from deployment as a soldier in the Pacific War (of World War Two) to his reservation community in New Mexico, and is suffering from symptoms of PTSD. *Ceremony* starkly shows us this from the outset, and the reader is placed into the context of a 'hidden history' of Indigenous soldiers who participated in America's World War Two military service. However, Marmon Silko unfolds Tayo's seemingly specific PTSD as a vehicle to explore wider historical and inherited traumas and complexities. As Tayo becomes increasingly unwell physically and mentally, he proceeds on a major journey of self-discovery through pursuing traditional Laguna Pueblo healing medicine. Throughout *Ceremony*, Marmon Silko exposes the history of genocide of Indigenous people, the legacy of colonialism that followed, and the emotional/psychological effects that are still lived with in contemporary life (1970s, at the time of publication).

The novel begins with a flashback of Tayo's time soldiering:

> "He saw the skin of the corpses again and again, in ditches of either side of the long muddy road – skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands; even white men were darker after death. There was no difference when they were swollen and

> covered with flies. That had become the worst thing for Tayo: they looked too familiar even when they were alive. When the sergeant told them to kill all the Japanese soldiers lined up in front of the cave... Tayo could not pull the trigger. The fever made him shiver...They called it battle fatigue, and they said hallucinations were common with malarial fever." (Marmon Silko, 1977, pp. 6-7)

In this traumatic episode, Tayo sees the men he is surrounded by as the same, in a view that is as devastating as it is equalising. The white Americans and Indigenous Americans that Tayo is serving with, and the Japanese soldiers and victims, all appear as the same to Tayo in this moment. This image of war lays bare the imagined differences sewn into societies by colonialism – and the effects of this at its most horrific and inhumane.

Where Shawn Wong dismantles the Frontier, Marmon Silko examines the militarisation of America's national identity, and layer after layer is peeled from this myth of nation that American colonialism feeds off – thereby reducing it to nothing and showing its unnecessary violence and false identity. Filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha examines the role that conflict plays in the West, stating: "Conflicts in Western contexts often serve to define identities." (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 150) Minh-ha also writes about the Insider/Outsider dichotomy and Othering, saying: "Any attempts at blurring the dividing line between outsider and insider would justifiably provoke anxiety, if not anger. Territorial rights are not being respected here." (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 70). Marmon Silko turns the depravity and segregation of conflict on its axis. She instead uses Tayo's PTSD, caused by a conflict which has become lionised in America, to in fact repair divisions and rifts. As *Ceremony* progresses, Tayo becomes empowered to counter the pain and violence enforced on him and his community, by seeing the strength he (as an individual) and his community (as a nation) have in their own ways of knowing in relation to identity and history. Tayo's trauma also presents him with the perspective that colonial violence and oppression is an evil for white Americans also, warping their identity as a dominant culture that continues to rely on conflict in an attempt to understand its positionality.

Wong and Marmon Silko each share with their readers deeply personal examinations of identity and painful historical traumas. In exchange for this vulnerability, it is my belief that the reader is required to exercise reciprocity and examine their own privilege and complicity in colonialism – whatever their background might be – and, to notice neocolonial practices in our current power structures. This leads me to discuss the process of self-reflection that is

also necessary for a decolonisation of Literature to occur. The reading of a text, the analysis of it, and how we respond, cannot be processes that happen in isolation of one another.

Part Two: Self-reflection and praxis

Here, I want to address the necessity of reflection on the self as a researcher, in order for active decolonising work in Literature to be realised and achieved. I will present this in the context of my own Literature studies, some of which I have explored briefly above, as a white British/Australian researcher who is engaging with Indigenous American and Chinese American texts, and with post/decolonial theories of race, racism, Indigeneity, migrancy, and national identity. Intersectionality plays a key role in this process of reflection and praxis.

On Indigenous American fiction, Catherine Rainwater states:

> "This kind of fiction demands a reader-participant who recognizes and respects the point of view of the cultural Other... who is ready to question ingrained assumptions about personal identity... The non-Indian reader-participant must resist "naturalizing" the Indian material of cross-cultural literature…" (Rainwater, 1999, p. 67)

And, placing this quote from Trinh T. Minh-ha in dialogue with Rainwater:

> "A responsible work today [is] a work that is careful not to turn a struggle into an object of consumption, and requires that responsibility to be assumed by the maker as well as by the audience, without whose participation no solution emerges…" (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 149)

Rainwater's concept of a 'reader-participant' as opposed to the traditional 'reader' allows our engagement with texts to become more involved. Rather than the text remaining 'elsewhere' or 'apart' from the reader, a reader-participant can engage with the text on a more profound level, emotionally and cognitively. Rainwater's proposal here aligns with the concept of Minh-ha's expectation for audiences to take it upon themselves to be present in their engagement with material, and allow themselves an open reflection upon how the material provokes responses.

It is obvious that reading a novel which explores a perspective the reader is unfamiliar with will expose that reader, in a factual sense, to lives or communities or events that they would otherwise remain unaware of. How to empower the said reader to experience change through a reading, and how to articulate this, is more challenging. Throughout my research journey, I

have been keen to examine the process of my own self-awareness alongside my evolving decolonial research practice and skills. At the beginning of this PhD, it became apparent that if I were to engage as effectively as possible with the chosen texts then an intense process of self-reflection also needed to occur alongside my readings. This became, and remains, an ethical issue that exists in conjunction with the academic. It was not acceptable to me to read the texts, analyse the texts, acknowledge the deeply personal inequalities explored by the authors, and extract my thesis in what would have been an exploitative manner. To do so might be to remain in my position of privilege and act as a white British/Australian researcher who has an interest in Indigenous American and Chinese American writing. Literature occupies a privileged position in that the 'data' for the research being conducted, in this instance on national/community identities, comes directly from the nation/community itself. The 'data' is not observed and filtered; it is presented to us in the words of the people themselves. To illustrate this, I refer to Vine Deloria Jr. who was a Standing Rock Sioux author and activist. He wrote on anthropological research and academia:

> "The fundamental thesis of the anthropologist is that people are objects for observation, people are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation, and for eventual extinction." (Deloria, 1969, p. 81)

Deloria here encapsulates the problem of academia which approaches social identities with an attitude of observation rather than participation. Literature cannot be extractive in this way. For Literature in Higher Education to develop into a decolonising discipline, rather than a postcolonial one, our unique position needs to be harnessed, and the texts need to be read (as Rainwater outlines) as an emotional participation, as opposed to an observation. This approach also prevents Literature from remaining in stasis of the *post*colonial, and allows it to grow as a radical area of research.

In actively pursuing the potential of postcolonial literary theory, and pushing it further into a decolonial approach with an interdisciplinary methodology, I am able to engage with texts with an intersectional emotional connection. The inequalities in the literature are not happening in realms beyond my reach – an impression which renders individuals inactive or apathetic – they are close to me, and are also my issues to challenge too.

This topic of self-reflection I do not explore here as a self-indulgence or for recognition – I raise it here as a process which I encourage other Literature researchers to engage with, and to examine where they might empower themselves and others through both their own

privileges *and* intersectionalities. This process involves a necessary discomfort in order to impart its transformative power.

Literature belongs to the 'family' of Humanities subjects. It seems to me that in order for Literature to remain human/e and to progress in our field, then decolonial readings and a process of self-reflection are essential, especially as the cultural foundations of identity around us continue to transform. There is a requirement for there to be a bridge between what happens in the academic reading and literary analysis of a text, and in the process of self-reflection. Within Literature, they do not exist as separate parts of the decolonial research process.

Forward

This chapter has sought to demonstrate the multiple layers at which decolonising work functions within Literature – the analysis of texts; redefining literary canons, history, and national identities; the impression this leaves on the reader; and using the discipline to create decolonial futures in our real-world actions. Using a decolonial lens within Literature analyses and readings enables researchers to recognise forms of colonial violence and oppression. This empowers us to re-examine the past and interrogate how particular historical narratives have been designed, and to remain aware and actively opposed to various forms of neocolonialism in our present lives.

This involves, as outlined, an examination of canon through our textual selection and reading approaches: "The subversion of a canon is not simply a matter of replacing one set of texts with another... A canon is not a body of texts *per se*, but rather a set of reading practices... these reading practices [are] resident in institutional structures... the subversion of a canon involves the bringing-to-consciousness and articulation of these practices and institutions…" (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p. 86). Percival Everett's novel *James* is a prime example of how the literary canon and a country's history can be destabilised and its focus recalibrated, to give voice to the oppressed, spoken-for, and Othered. Everett writes from the perspective of the character Jim, who originally appeared in Mark Twain's revered/reviled work *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and is an enslaved man. Everett himself stated that *James* was not a re-telling of that story: "I do not view the work as a corrective, but rather I see myself in conversation with Twain." (The Booker Prizes, 2024). To what was originally a children's adventure story, Everett brings the perspective of Jim/James autonomously seizing his identity amongst the history and legacy of American slavery. If such texts are

incorporated into the American literary canon and its writing traditions, the landscape of America’s cultural identity might be terraformed. I refer here to a deliberate reformation of what constitutes foundational American texts, in terms of the past, and the future. This cannot be achieved by authors alone – their publications must be a focus of critique for Literature academics and researchers, which are read for their individuality, and as intertextual entities. (This does raise an entirely separate discussion of whether authors/artists wish to be incorporated into this discourse.) The colonial past cannot be erased and idealistically forgotten about, nor must it be negotiated with – it must be criticised and expanded.

The issue remains however that texts such as *Homebase*, *Ceremony,* and *James* are still largely excluded from being considered American Literature or ‘classics’ because of their ‘alternative’ histories and identities. This maintaining of ‘the Other’ existing apart from the American literary ‘crowd’, this practice of placing these literatures time and time again in the margins, serves only to stoke feelings of displacement and alienation, and to contribute to an impoverishment and paucity of American culture. If, through genuinely effective and radical literary analysis, the American canon can be redefined, then the broadening of American identity can be imagined. This has an ability to filter into policymaking and fostering positive cultural relations, both within America's diverse communities, and with other nations. Decolonial texts and reading/analysis practices are powerful forms of confrontation to neocolonial ways of knowing, teaching critical thinking, and showing real-world effects of inherited prejudices from past atrocities and misinformation. Yet these possibilities within Literature sadly remain under constant threat and are a challenge to bring to fruition. Goldsmiths, University of London, announced in May 2024 that they would be teaching out and closing their MA in Black British Literature (The Guardian, 2024). In America, the Federal Government attempted to enforce practices in early 2025 to re-marginalise and erase the history of America’s BIPOC figures (NPR, 2025), whilst the number of banned books reached a high not seen since 1950s McCarthyism and “predominantly targets books about race and racism or individuals of color” (PEN America, 2025). The decolonial potential of Literature and our researchers continues to be as subversive and essential as ever.

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