Decolonising Guillory?: The Contradictions of English in Australia

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John Guillory’s *Professing Criticism* (2022) is, without doubt, a tour de force of critical scholarship and intellectual acumen. He delves deep into the rise of vernacular languages and the history of English literature, charting the development of literary criticism as a profession and the emergence of English literature as a discipline. Guillory’s account makes it clear that one of these things need not inevitably lead to the other, a point reinforced by his explanation of their separate origins and the case studies he puts forward of two ‘failed disciplines’ (belles lettres and philology). The meticulous and exhaustive genealogy he provides for the formation of English literature makes the narrowness of his definition of what constitutes such a literature all the more startling. From an Antipodean perspective, it is astonishingly Americentric, especially for a theorist so clearly attuned to the expansion of English literature beyond national borders.

Guillory makes no attempt to hide the fact that his interest revolves around the teaching of English literature in an American context. However, the clear and direct path he cuts between an originary English (qua British) literature and its natural successor of American literature sits at odds with his championing of linguistic diversity (Guillory, *Professing* 242) and the focus he places on ‘the category of literature as the result of a historical process rather than a historical event or moment’ (203). This is particularly evident in his discussion of attempts to decolonise the curriculum in the English department at New York University,
where the complete omission of not only Antipodean but also of Canadian literature makes it clear that, for Guillory, the term 'English literature' operates as a shorthand for Anglo-American literature alone.

The world thus comes to be divided into English literature (a.k.a. Anglo-American literature) and Global English (serving ostensibly as a term that captures postcolonial literatures written predominantly by English speakers in non-Anglo countries). Decolonisation is understood as a process of making space on the curriculum for non-Anglo-American literature, taken by default to mean the category of Global English. In response to this, Guillory warns against the reductive nature of identity politics or of simply readjusting the curriculum to provide adequate 'representation' to minorities from all walks of life. He goes so far as to propose that curricular revision need not be motivated specifically or only by the aim of decolonisation, which is a limited frame for capturing the relations of literary works to local cultural environments or their external relations to global sites. These relations are enormously complex; they are interactions that cannot be reduced to unilateral acts of domination or appropriation. (233)

This stance is entirely consistent with the doubts he expressed thirty years ago in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (1993) as to literature’s capacity to carry the political burden of minority representation and the role that universities play in the establishment and propagation of such a canon. Guillory may well be motivated by a desire to move away from a superficial 'politics of the image' (*Cultural Capital* 7-8), yet as Mark Chiang has recently pointed out, there is a somewhat retrograde quality in the very refusal to engage with the ways in which cultural capital relates to racial capital.

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1 The term ‘Anglo’ here is vague and purposely so, referring not only to people of Anglo-Celtic descent but also to an Anglosphere constituted by Britain and its former colonies who, until recently, were characterised by the strong interrelationship between their Anglophone cultures and majority white populations. I am defining this group of ‘Anglo’ nations as Britain, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

2 In *Cultural Capital*, Guillory voices concern about the dangers of equating a politics of representation with genuine political change. He writes: ‘The primacy of social identity of the author in the pluralist critique of the canon means that the revaluation of works on this basis will inevitably seek its ground in the author’s experience, conceived as the experience of a marginalised race, class, or gender identity’ (10). Nevertheless, the ability to ignore intersectional politics in discussions about canon formation or the university curricula remains a unique expression of white male privilege. This is a point recently underscored by Mark Chiang’s response to *Professing Criticism*. For Chiang, ‘the value of cultural capital, at least in modern Western societies, is inexorably defined to some degree by race’ (Chiang 103). It is also evident in Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera’s account of the difficulties he had in getting a review of Guillory’s book published, with one editor rejecting his submission because ‘the conversation was at a “saturation point”’ (Herlihy-Mera).
The pitfalls of turning away from identity politics completely can be seen in the unfortunate manner that Guillory’s division of English literature into two halves—Anglo-American literature and Global English—echoes much cruder civilisational discourses that style the world as the West and the Rest. The total elision of Canadian, Australian or New Zealander literature (or what used to be called Dominions literature) from the category of ‘English literature’ creates a false impression that English literature was a somewhat cohesive entity, neatly summed up and bound together by what we would call the English literary canon before the more recent incursions of postcolonial literatures from Global English.

I do not wish to sound unduly critical of Guillory in making these observations, for this reductive approach to English literature is one that has been wholly internalised within Australia. It’s difficult to imagine an English university deciding to move away from teaching works by English authors, or an American university turning their back on an American literature program in favour of books by foreign authors, and yet in recent decades this has been exactly the trend for Australian institutions. In 2019, the University of Sydney drew public outcry with its decision not to find a replacement for Robert Dixon, the chair in Australian Literature, upon his retirement. This left the chair in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia as the sole academic post of its kind. Its equivalent at the University of Melbourne, the Boisbouvier Chair, is a post intended for someone engaged in creative practice and has, to date, always been held by a novelist.

In her sharp criticism of the University of Sydney’s failure to support Australian literary scholarship, Susan Lever looked back on the public fundraising campaign in the 1960s that originally helped establish the chair and said: ‘Though the fundraising campaign was insufficient to cover the chair, the university’s decision to make up the difference appeared to be an acknowledgement of the need to nurture, criticise and appreciate the work of Australian writers. It was a public statement about the importance of writing in the cultural life of the nation’ (Lever). By extension, the discontinuation of funding seemed to convey the very opposite, further signalling the marginal role afforded to literature within Australian culture.

Much was made of the symbolism to be found in the University’s refusal to continue funding a chair professorship in the field, and yet the far more significant casualty had, in fact, already been claimed the year before when the major in Australian Literature was downgraded to a minor. This winnowing down of course offerings came in response to falling student numbers—a malaise that has affected English literature departments worldwide and which, as Guillory reminds us, is bound up tightly in overarching trends such as the loss of status suffered by
humanities subjects due to their perceived lack of vocational benefit in comparison to STEM subjects. Nevertheless, the cessation of the major in Australian Literature held particular importance because the University of Sydney had been the only institution in the country that offered students such an option.

The loss of the chair professorship in Australian Literature at the University of Sydney was somewhat ameliorated by the announcement that the John Rowe Lectureship in Australian Literary Studies would be created in its stead. It should be noted, however, that media interest in the University’s decision to end the chair post failed to inspire any form of public largesse. Additional funds to create the John Rowe Lectureship were not donated in response to public outcry about the need to continue supporting Australian literature and scholarship, but instead reappropriated from a $3 million bequest that John Rowe OAM had left to the University in 2017. The initial bequest was intended ‘for study and research in Australian literature, including scholarships, endowment of a lecture, and the purchase of library books’ (The University of Sydney 19).3 Whilst it is significant that the University of Sydney has found a way to retain an Australian literature specialist within the English Department, the fact that this has come at the expense of scholarships that would support younger scholars entering the field rather encapsulates the grim predicament in which the study of Australian literature finds itself.

Alarm bells about the decline of Australian literature as a discipline have been ringing since the turn of the millennium.4 The sinking fortunes of Australian literature within the academy have followed a much deeper cultural shift that has altered the value placed on the humanities. It is a simple fact of the neoliberalised university that we are witnessing the loss of diversity within English departments. Guillory describes this as a necessary ‘contraction’ in ‘British and American literature of earlier periods’ (Professing 232), a measure that must be undertaken to make room on the syllabus to teach English literature by non-British or non-American authors. Guillory is not alone in seeing decolonisation as being a process whereby Anglocentric English literature is pushed aside by the increasingly vocal, and visible, postcolonial literatures of Global English. As he observes, these are the very dynamics that had previously fuelled ‘culture wars’ within the Anglosphere and beyond.5 Yet his criticism of decolonisation as ‘a limited frame for capturing

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3 The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences did not respond to my requests for further clarification on whether the Estate of John Rowe had contributed additional funds to establish the lectureship. Given that the John Rowe bequest was made from a deceased estate, as well as the continued absence of any scholarships for the study of Australian literature, we might surmise that this initial bequest is the lump sum total.

4 See, for example, Cantrell.

5 Guillory writes: ‘Decolonisation of the curriculum in the United Kingdom and the United States appears to rehearse many of the same arguments for canonical revision undertaken decades earlier in the “culture wars”’ (227). In the Australian context, where earlier Culture Wars
the relations of literary works to local cultural environments or their external relations to global sites’ (233) seems to hinge on this inherently combative framework, which understands English literature in terms of a historical canon that is somehow, only recently, being expanded to accommodate Global English.

Survivorship bias is an ongoing and ever-present issue in our construction of literary canons and the way in which we teachCanonical works. There is a marked tendency to see a text’s ability to endure over time as tangible proof of its quality. This assumption, drawn from a Darwinian concept of evolutionary survival, is threaded throughout contemporary literary approaches, from Franco Moretti’s concept of literary historiography to David Damrosch’s approach to the global circulation of texts and the criteria by which they qualify as ‘world literature’. It is perhaps worth stopping to ask whether the conditions of biological evolution are an apt framework or even metaphor to use for the circulation of cultural artefacts such as literary texts, or whether this is merely a deep internalisation of the principles that underpin modern capitalist approaches to objects and value.

The cultural value ascribed to texts in the literary canon becomes a self-reinforcing phenomenon, something that can be seen even if we go back to that most canonical figure: Shakespeare. In Shakespeare and Lost Plays: Reimagining Drama in Early Modern England (2021), David McInnis points out something that seems obvious but is rarely addressed—Shakespeare wrote within and responded to a vibrant ecology of repertory plays which are now lost to us. McInnis’ interest in this shadow archive reveals particular fallacies in our understanding of the principles of canon formation. Whereas it is often assumed that specific texts are preserved because they were of evident quality or stature above their peers, McInnis reminds us, ‘Plays become lost for a variety of reasons and appeals to “quality” as the basis of non-preservation are not genuine explanations: without comparative data, “quality” is unmeasurable’ (McInnis 3). By confusing survivorship with literary value, we conveniently ignore the material conditions that propel certain texts into the future and ensure that others fade into obscurity.

When the discipline of Australian literary study emerged in the mid-twentieth century, literary scholars understood the formation of a national canon to be one of their central projects. The dire situation of Australian literature within the academy has all-too frequently been seen as a reflection of the quality of Australian literature itself. In 1955, A. D. Hope justified the establishment of a course solely devoted to Australian Literature at Canberra University College by

revolved around the expansion of the category of Australian literature to include more diverse, multicultural perspectives (including Aboriginal literature as a subset), the current impetus for de-colonisation very much foregrounds the need to redress long-term structural inequalities suffered by Aboriginal peoples in Australia and to reposition Aboriginal culture as central to the Australian nation. See, for instance, Gunew and compare with Araluen.
saying: ‘because our native literature is a minor one among the literatures of the world, because it is limited in range and has hardly any writers of first rank, and because it is a branch of English literature in general, its study should not be simply an alternative to the study of English literature. It should, I believe, be undertaken only by students who have already undergone or who are undergoing training in one of the major world literatures, preferably that of England’ (Hope 169). The move to teach Australian literature in English departments seventy years ago was, in itself, an attempt to decolonise a curriculum that was almost exclusively centred around British literature. Its apparent failure may be attributed to the way that a mid-century conception of Australian literature centred around a narrow group of authors, taught by an equally attenuated group of scholars.6

There are undoubtedly people in Australia who share with Guillory the idea that English literature bifurcates naturally along these two paths: an Anglocentric canonical literature (in our case an Anglo-Australian rather than Anglo-American track) and a profusion of voices represented by the new arrivals crowded into the category of Global English—the literature by people whose adoption of the English language is an unfortunate outcome of colonialism; a deformation of the original structure, as it were. However, decolonisation is more than simply the insertion of different voices into our curricula. The process of decolonisation should not exclusively fall within the purview of those with non-Anglo backgrounds, nor should this be framed as a procedure of ‘making space’ or ‘giving way’ to new postcolonial literatures. The very purpose of decolonisation is to make visible the inequities encoded into our world, biases that for too long have been accepted as the natural order of things. To decolonise the curriculum is to recognise the structural conditions that have shaped the literary canon we have inherited, preventing some voices from entering and others from being preserved.

Guillory’s reduction of English literature to the corpus of Anglo-American literature is a prime example of how imperial formations inevitably influence the authors we read, study and reify. And whilst it may be too much to ask a man with such little incentive to read Australian literature as Guillory to countenance a broader category of English literature—one that may exist even before the introduction of postcolonial voices—it is surely an imperative that we, in the Antipodes, do so.

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6 In a 1976 study, Bruce Bennett observed the overt preference for Oxbridge or London degrees visible in the academic staff employed by English departments at Australian universities. The figures he provides are remarkably stable with roughly 50 percent of staff holding Oxbridge/London degrees in 1947 and 45 percent in 1973 (Bennett). Meaghan Morris assessed the field in 1991, saying: ‘I’ve always been a bit ambivalent about Australian Studies, which has often struck me in practice as an inward and backward-looking discipline, although in theory there’s no need for it to be so’ (Morris 470).
The discipline of Australian literary study seems, by and large, unaware that Australian literature itself holds a lingering reputation as a parochial literature that rarely captured an authentic sense of Australian life, let alone the rich diversity of Australian experience. This is an inevitable consequence of Australian literary study having been established with a distinct nationalist agenda during the throes of the White Australian Policy. The entrenched racism and gender inequality that characterises our national history and filters through into our literary works is not something that can simply be passed over. A conditioned and continual deference to British literature as the gold standard of culture and learning has also unduly influenced the way in which Australian literature is produced and received.

For a long time, the courses taught in universities seemed out of sync with the exciting work that was being produced by Australian authors, more concerned with looking backwards towards a colonial past instead of fully grappling with the issues of a multicultural present. The Referendum for the Voice may have failed to pass in 2023, but Aboriginal voices have already established themselves as crucial pillars of Australian literature. We find this reflected, in turn, by the overhaul that Australian literature syllabi have undergone this past decade. It is no longer acceptable to teach an Australian literature course without acknowledgement of Aboriginal writing. This is not simply a question of allowing greater representation of minority groups onto the syllabus, but rather a step towards removing the colonial lens of Britishness that has distorted our sense of self.

Decolonisation is, necessarily, a tearing down of past structures in order to start from a new foundation. The all-too-easy way in which Guillory elides Australian literature from that category of English literature stands as a warning. We can teach English literature in the manner Guillory describes—with an Anglo-American curriculum making way for greater acknowledgement of Global English. But where does Australian literature fit within this configuration? Are we to be subsumed within the dominant strand represented by Anglo-American literature or do we resign ourselves to being yet another case study within Global English? Without substantial support from either government, tertiary institutions or the private sector, scholarship in Australian literature is unlikely to continue in all but the most meagre of ways. Such are the contradictions of English in Australia.

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Works Cited


