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Australian Journal of English Education

Guidelines for Contributors

The *Australian Journal of English Education* is the peer-reviewed national journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE).

The journal is committed to publishing material that is of importance to English educators. We welcome high quality teacher-oriented and scholarly submissions in any relevant field of English education, including literature and literacy education.

We are interested in submissions that reflect dilemmas, debates and concerns facing current contemporary English educators in Australia and elsewhere. Submissions may take the form of:

- A report on empirical research conducted with or by English teachers or students in classrooms
- A theorised discussion of English curriculum, or of the effects of policy on English teaching, or
- Practitioner inquiries, including reflective writing that takes a scholarly and methodical approach, that elaborates or illuminates aspects of the practices of English teachers.

Submissions should be explicitly linked to issues of English teaching, pedagogy or curriculum and demonstrate familiarity with current and pertinent scholarly literature.

Articles will be considered from any context where the learning and teaching of English is framed in ways that would engage and interest a secondary English teacher. Writers should take care to relate, early in their submission, the research context for the benefit of both Australian and international readers. The journal welcomes contributions that challenge traditional ways of thinking about English and that prompt readers to entertain new ways of conceptualising English curriculum and pedagogy

Contributors are encouraged to read previous issues of *English in Australia* to get a sense of the existing and ongoing scholarly conversations in our journal. Articles that share Higher Degree Research conducted by English teachers (e.g. Ph.D. and Ed.D. research findings) are welcome.

All articles are subject to double blind peer review by at least two reviewers. This means that the identity of the author is not divulged to the reviewers, nor are the reviewers' names revealed to the author.

Please refer to the following guidelines:

1. All articles should be submitted via Scholastica: https://ajee.scholasticahq.com/
2. Recommended length of articles for publication is between 4000 and 8000 words (including references).
3. Ensure your name is removed from the article, including from the document properties.
4. All submissions should be typed with double spacing in an easy to read font (e.g. Times New Roman or Calibri, 11–12 point) with a 2.5 cm margin on all sides.
5. Your submission should begin with an abstract of 100–150 words that succinctly summarises the research: context; design or methodology; and findings.
6. All references should conform to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. Please consult the *APA Publication Manual*, 7th edition, or any guide to APA referencing available through university library websites.
7. Submissions are expected to have a high standard of written English. Please ensure that you have carefully edited and proofread your submission. Articles submitted with a poor standard of written English, style problems or inaccurate/missing references will be returned to the author for revision before being considered for blind review.
8. Where possible, avoid footnotes. Usually it is possible to incorporate them into the text. Where they cannot be avoided, they should be numbered with a superscript and listed at the end of the article (endnotes).
9. It is the responsibility of authors to seek copyright clearance for any materials quoted, as required.
10. It is the responsibility of authors to ensure that all required ethics approvals and relevant permissions have been received prior to the submission of an article for review. Please ensure that a statement about ethical issues appears in articles that include data collected from or about humans, including any pertinent information about approvals or permissions.
11. It is expected that a clear statement about the implications of the research for English education policy and/or practice appears in either the Introduction or Conclusion section of your article.
12. Please include in Scholastica a separate file with your full name and institutional affiliation for publication, and a 50-word biographical description.
13. You retain copyright of materials published in the journal; *Australian Journal of English Education* holds first publication rights only. Authors retain the right to self-archive the final draft of their articles in their institution's eprint repository.

You can expect feedback from the reviewers and editor to help you shape your work effectively. Please feel free to contact the Editor or members of the Editorial team to discuss any contribution which you may be considering.

Although *Australian Journal of English Education* is predominantly a curriculum research and practice journal, occasionally poems and short texts of other genres relevant to the themes and readership of the journal are also published. Such pieces should be relevant to the lives and work of English teachers and students and be accompanied by a short (300–800 word) abstract or reflection. Please email the Editor regarding submissions of this type.

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Editorial

LITERARY STUDIES and LITERARY EDUCATION • SPECIAL ISSUE

Philip Mead and Kelli McGraw

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE and QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

This is the first issue of the journal under its new title of the *Australian Journal of English Education*. This change heralds a renewed sense of the journal's scope and readership. The new title retains both the national provenance of its contemporary professional focus, and emphasises its centrality to the field of English education, with its many global inflections and supranational filiations. English education in Australia is a network of multiple and rapidly changing areas of professional teaching practice, classroom learning, teacher education, and research, each in conversation with their local, national and international communities. It encompasses the on-going challenges of teacher education, as well as age-old questions about the importance of literacy, and about which authors, genres and forms are to be the focus of work in the English classroom. And it includes considerations of which textual practices English teachers are going to privilege in their teaching. The journal aims to embrace and to support the great diversity and fast developing nature of the field of English education.

In recent years specific urgencies in English education have been influential in the teaching practice of English teachers. The division of English into literacy, literature and language strands of study and learning, as adopted and promulgated by the Australian Curriculum, has presented questions about the content and interrelations of those strands, along with questions about what constitutes knowledge in those partitions of English. The lodging of standardised testing within the literacy strand, can distort the value and perception of the other strands of English. The extent and value of literary study within the English curriculum remains an issue of some debate and contention. The teaching of English now engages with media ecologies and digital technologies across many fronts. The advent of AI has introduced multiple questions for thinking about originality in writing, the generics of remixing and sampling, and the credibility of assessment. Considerations of the secondary-tertiary

nexus in English education have raised questions about the degree to which teachers in the different sectors are in dialogue and professional exchange, and about the curricular and pedagogical modes of the different sectors. Further, the singularity of English education is challenged by increased understanding about and recognition of multiple 'Englishes'. First Nations' Englishes (see *English in Australia* 54.1 January 2019) is one instance of the evolution of language education that is premised on the cultural and linguistic life of Aboriginal English. The accommodations and negotiations between English teaching and the teaching of Aboriginal English, with its many political and linguistic differences from mainstream English in Australia is a dynamic aspect of contemporary Australian education (see AITSIS, 'Aboriginal English,' https://aiatsis.gov.au/blog/aboriginal-english).

The papers in this special issue on 'Literary Studies and Literary Education' reflect this range and diversity of contemporary research in literature, literacy and pedagogy. They respond to our call for contributions on literary texts, the teaching of literature, and the positioning of literature within English studies and the English curriculum. They also reflect the differences in the experience and perspectives of researchers within the communities of English education. With this issue, we share with you a range of works that each shed light in some way on the connections between the worlds of secondary English and university English, in particular relating to the landscape of literary studies.

This issue's theoretical contributions invite us to consider (or return to) the need for ethical engagement in literature classrooms, including questions of subjectivity, authenticity and freedom. Dominic Nah's review of literature synthesises key ideas about the 'ethical turn' in literary studies, offering ways forward for ethical meaning-making and ethically oriented literature classrooms. Nah articulates ways to expand our pedagogical repertoire for encountering 'resistant and self-oriented student responses' focussing on

intersubjective practices to move the study of literature beyond transactional purposes. Jessica Gildersleeve and Alison Bedford approach the question of active meaning-making from a different angle, shedding light on ways that critical writing in secondary contexts may be out of sync with current approaches in tertiary studies. They explore how freedom can be realised in critical writing tasks where students are empowered to write critically. This includes having access to time and materials, being encouraged to write in non-formulaic ways, and not being disadvantaged by writing in mould-breaking ways.

Colleen Smit, Burcu Erkut and Paul Gardner further contribute to the discourse on ethical and critical literacy in this issue by illuminating possible issues in teaching 'disquieting texts' with 'confronting issues'. Their study of parent and community responses to a challenging primary school text suggest we revisit the need to create psychologically safe and secure environments and plan ways to include parents as key stakeholders in education. This can entail considerable teacher preparation including prior discussion with parents, and planning to employ a 'pedagogy of hope' that includes positive explorations of power in the critical literacy experience. Helena Kadmos shows in her analysis of *The Hive* that Australian dystopian young adult fiction has much to offer such critical reading and critical conversations for older learners. In the case of *The Hive*, Kadmos argues students would benefit from also reading the following book in the duology. We wonder and encourage more research about the ways that educators currently and in future can structure literary learning to include space for such extended and personalised inquiries.

Liam Semler's exploration of teaching Shakespeare and Taylor Swift side by side engages with the hierarchies of poetry from the canonical and historical to the popular and contemporary. Semler deploys the notions of affinity spaces and pointing as frames for pedagogical practice in the classroom, specifically in the teaching of Swift's album *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets. His pedagogical reflections detail in fascinating ways the structures and themes shared by Swift's assemblage of songs and Shakespeare's poems. The innovative impetus of this article derives from its detailed consideration of how one kind of poetic form – popular songs – can energize and transform the teaching of canonical texts in the classroom.

In an interview with Kate Mulvaney about her stage play adaptation of *Jasper Jones*, Hall and Moran and colleagues discuss how speaking texts in performance opens possibilities for personal response that are not afforded by the written text. Here, performance has a pedagogical role in initiating dialogues about the ongoing impact of Australia's colonial history, in ways that develop students' empathy with various characters and awareness of their own standpoint. McKnight offers further questions about the role of the English/literature educator in Australia after encountering in her archival studies some ways that her experience of Literary Studies had invited her to be, that now need rejecting or reframing. Encouraging a post-human, post-colonial approach, she imagines a new model in which Literary Studies and English education in Australia are 'as much about stolen Country as they are about great works of literature'. Theorising insights from the archival study, McKnight offers a model for working with literature in three circles of craft, curiosity and complexity.

As a collection, the papers in this special issue weave old and new threads of argument about the purposes and functions of the literary aspects of English education. Many arguments posit the study of literature as part of a wider democratic purpose of study in the humanities. All seek ways of offering rich pedagogical conditions for personally responding to literature, and positioning students of literature as active meaning-makers. These are the old threads. The questions raised in this issue about how to continue this work with care for others, hope for the future, and increased respect for sovereignty are newer threads, woven in now with greater regularity to our cross-sector discussions of literary knowledge.

AATE National and International Fellows

From time to time AATE appoints outstanding educators, researchers and authors as AATE Fellows, inviting them to present at AATE conferences and deliver exclusive online workshops.

We're proud to acknowledge AATE National Fellow Cara Shipp and AATE International Fellow Jeff Wilhelm, both of whom have become well known throughout Australia for their contribution to the teaching of English and in particular the delivery of AATE professional learning.

AATE National Fellow
Cara Shipp

AATE International Fellow
Professor Jeffrey Wilhelm

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW, around Dubbo, Parkes and Trangi) and currently Head of Senior School at Silkwood School on the Gold Coast. As part of the Big Picture Learning Australia network of schools, Cara is a Big Picture Coach at Silkwood and with schools across SE QLD and Northern NSW.

Cara has previously run alternative educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; held Head Teacher English/HASS/Languages positions; and served as President, Vice President and Editor with the ACT Association for the Teaching of English (ACTATE). She has also served as ACTATE Delegate on AATE Council.

Cara completed a Master of Education focusing on Aboriginal literacy and regularly presents cultural competence training at local and national conferences, particularly within the context of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the English curriculum. Her recent AATE publication, *Listening from the Heart: re-writing the teaching of English with First Nations voices*, documents this work, and she has a blog on the topic at https://missshipp.wordpress.com/

A full-time classroom teacher for 15 years, Jeff Wilhelm is currently Distinguished Professor of English Education at Boise State, director of the Boise State Writing Project (and the founding director of the Maine Writing Project!) and a teacher of middle- or high-schoolers each spring. He has authored 42 texts, mostly about literacy teaching, including: the NCTE Promising Research Award winner *You Gotta BE the Book* and the Russell Awards for Distinguished Research for both *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* and for *Reading Unbound: Promoting the Power of Pleasure Reading*. His latest books are *Planning Powerful Instruction: 7 Must Make Moves of Transformational Teaching* which operationalises major agreements from across the learning sciences about effective teaching and powerful learning and *Fighting Fake News: Identifying and Interrogating Information Pollution* about how to help students know the susceptibilities of their own minds and how to control for these when reading digital texts and social media.

Teaching Taylor Swift's *Midnights* and Shakespeare's Sonnets Together:
Affinity, Pointing and the 'Journey in my Head'

Liam E. Semler, The University of Sydney

Abstract: In this essay I argue that the theoretical ideas of 'passionate affinity spaces' (Gee and Hayes) and 'pointing' (Prange and Biesta) may be set in relation to one another to illuminate how educators may respect students as autonomous subjects while also underscoring the importance of the teacher's directing role in the literature classroom. I exemplify how this works by presenting Taylor Swift's album Midnights and Shakespeare's sonnets as complementary collections that may be taught in conversation with each other. The essay includes discussion prompts for use in the classroom.

Keywords: Shakespeare's sonnets, Taylor Swift, affinity spaces, educational pointing, teaching, *Midnights*, pedagogy of interruption

In this essay I make a case for, and offer practical approaches to, teaching Taylor Swift's album *Midnights* (2022) and Shakespeare's sonnets (1609) together in the English classroom.[1] Shakespeare is often invoked in news and opinion pieces that praise Swift's songwriting (Bate, 2023; Hoby, 2015); online quizzes test people's ability to distinguish between Swiftian and Shakespearean quotations, blogs and podcasts celebrate the two artists together (Doyle, 2024; McCausland, 2023; Rice, 2021) and various universities co-teach them (Dolan, 2023; Scala, 2022; Short, 2023), yet there remains a dearth of peer-reviewed publications detailing how and why one might teach them together. I aim to remedy this by offering a pedagogically focused comparative analysis of *Midnights* and the sonnets that is grounded in the theoretical ideas of 'affinity' and 'pointing', which come from the work of (respectively) James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes, and Klaus Prange and Gert J.J. Biesta. To honour texts that students love outside the bounds of school (i.e., texts for which they feel an affinity) without dishonouring the teacher's act of pointing to texts within the school (i.e., texts which are deemed important in institutional, disciplinary terms) is to celebrate the identities of both student and teacher and to strengthen their collective educational experience.

Teaching *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets together can help ameliorate the oft-reported difficulties of engaging students with poetry, and particularly with Shakespeare, at the same time as demonstrating to them that popular culture is valued in English and its texts may be illuminated by disciplinary skills and practices more usually focused on canonical texts. The value of teaching canonical literature and pop culture together at school has been widely demonstrated in earlier research (Bowmer & Curwood, 2010; Buhler, 2016; Gritter et al., 2014; Hulbert et al., 2006); if Swift's songs prompt us to ask textual and contextual questions that may also reasonably be put to Shakespeare's sonnets, and vice versa, then students (and teachers) may develop both a more fluid understanding of the relationship between canonical and pop culture texts and a more authentic awareness of the relevance and importance of subject English.

Numerous studies over many years have revealed that poetry is considered both an essential component of literary studies, and, in contrast to most other genres, particularly challenging to teach effectively (Andrews, 1991; Dias, 2010; Dymoke et al., 2013; Manuel & Carter, 2015; Sigvardsson, 2020; Weaven & Clark, 2009). It is often perceived as elitist, difficult and boring by teenagers who assume ahead of time that it will be hard to understand and have little relevance to their lives. Poetry's intimidating reputation thus becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the classroom, where many teachers struggle to present it in ways that are dynamic, engaging and relevant to students.

Shakespeare can present similar problems. James Stredder (2009) thinks of this as Shakespeare's 'monumentalism', whereby 'there is often a feeling from the outset that the supposed difficulty and remoteness of Shakespeare are overwhelming, as though his works are an icy rock face. It is this that intimidates or alienates many learners' (p. 3). Similarly, Ralph Alan Cohen (2018) acknowledges that Shakespeare's name is 'synonymous with daunting academic challenge – an unwanted hurdle that afflicts students and teachers alike with a phobia I call "ShakesFear"' (p. ix).

Shakespeare's canonicity (manifesting as an ubiquitous and often mandatory curriculum presence) and perceived unapproachability (manifesting as student dislike and teacher anxiety) have been catalysts for myriad innovative pedagogies in the field of Shakespeare studies over many years (Bickley & Stevens, 2023; Eklund & Hyman, 2019; Gibson, 1998; Semler et al., 2023; Thompson & Turchi, 2016; Winston, 2015). It is perfectly normal in Shakespeare education to teach his works in tandem with popular culture texts, genres and issues because students respond well to seeing Shakespeare in, as it were, modern dress (Buhler, 2016; Driver & Hewes, 2023; Fazel & Geddes, 2017; Gritter et al., 2014; Henderson & Vitale, 2021; Hulbert et al., 2006). In the three sections that follow I will therefore: (1) discuss the concept of 'passionate affinity spaces' with reference to Taylor Swift's fandom; (2) explain the idea of educational 'pointing' in the context of co-teaching Swift and Shakespeare; and (3) building on these ideas, present an array of conceptual and poetic bridges between *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets to facilitate the teaching of the two texts together in the classroom.

Affinity and Swift fandom

In 2011 James Paul Gee and Elisabeth R. Hayes declared that '[t]he new learning system, competing today in many respects with our school systems, is learning as part of popular culture' (p. 69). Over a decade later, this seems truer than ever. One such form of learning, which they deem 'complex, deep, and knowledge-producing,' is 'passionate affinity-based learning' (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 69). They define it thus:

> Passionate affinity-based learning occurs when people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavour, interest, or passion. The people have an affinity (attraction) to the shared endeavour, interest, or passion first and foremost and then to others because of their shared affinity.
>
> Just as school is, in one sense, a place or space where people (students and teachers) are 'in school' or 'at school,' passionate affinity-based learning is done in a place or space, what we call a 'passionate affinity space,' which may be real or virtual or both. (Gee & Hayes, 2011, p. 69)

In numerous publications, Gee and Hayes elaborate on how authentic learning seems to flourish amidst the vitality, complexity and collaborative ethos of affinity spaces such as online multiplayer games and internet fan forums (Gee, 2007; Gee, 2013a; Gee, 2013b; Gee & Hayes, 2011). Gee gives a succinct account of affinity spaces in *The anti-education era* (2013b), where he represents them 'at their best' as 'key examples of synchronised intelligence' because '[m]ultiple tools, different types of people, and diverse skill sets are networked in ways that make everyone smarter and make the space itself a form of emergent intelligence' (p. 174). He provides a list of key traits, including but not limited to the following: people are in the spaces by choice; they are diverse in age, skill level and passion for the endeavour; the focus is not just on knowing, but on doing and problem solving; the spaces are permeable and influenced by knowledge from outside; and they are positive and proactive about learning and sharing knowledge between members. Gee and Hayes (2011) argue that if school-based teaching struggles to engage students and trains them in skills that seem meaningful only within school systems then what is needed is reform that taps the energy and authenticity of passionate affinity spaces.

The notion of passionate affinity spaces speaks directly to Taylor Swift's place in popular culture: Swift fandom exemplifies the key traits listed above, and

educators teaching poetry (including Shakespeare's sonnets) can draw on this dynamism to energise the English classroom. As I write, Swift is at the peak of her popularity to date and engaged in the initial US leg of her massively successful Eras Tour, which will see her visit Australia in 2024, performing to large audiences in already sold-out venues. The intensity and scale of fan devotion to Swift, and her clever online and real-world management of her immense following, are unparalleled in the world of popular music. Alim Kheraj (2022) puts it this way:

> Head to Reddit, Twitter or a specific corner of TikTok known as SwiftTok, and you'll find fans analysing interviews, social media posts and the minutiae of her music videos, from the outfit colours and hairstyles to the significance of different buttons in an elevator in a music video. Each theory is backed up with Sherlockian levels of evidence: facts, figures, quotes and even the number of words used in social media posts all become pieces of a puzzle that may not even exist. It's all part of the pop star's plan: 'I've trained them to be that way,' she has said.

Kheraj (2022) is not exaggerating. It is eye-popping to visit Reddit and explore the conversations and content in the Taylor Swift community, or to visit Swift's accounts on Twitter Instagram or TikTok to get a taste of the slick PR-machine in full flight, sharing content, promoting songs, albums and merchandise, and linking to the Taylor Swift website. Or try SwiftTok and the Swiftipedia wiki for deep immersion in the swirling eddies of Swiftie fandom (Hurler, 2022; Swiftipedia, n.d.). *Everything* is discussed in arresting and at times genuinely disturbing detail, from the symbolism of every song to the importance of the number 13, new and forthcoming work, theories about Swift's relationships and details of her family members, cats, clothes and legs. The infinite, muti-platform mixture of Swift's official videos, fans' videos from her concerts and fans' videos of themselves engaged in all manner of Swiftie behaviour is a heady cocktail.

According to Wagner James Au, Swift has created her own 'huge virtual community across basically all the social-media platforms' and this 'ideational world' 'is all Taylor Swift and Taylor Swift-associated content' (Nyce, 2022). Nyce and Au discuss how Swift is 'actually bigger than the metaverse' because, while the Swiftiverse may not (yet) incorporate a substantial VR element – a key piece of Mark Zuckerberg's 'metaverse' vision – it demonstrates her conquest of the 'community and culture question' (Nyce, 2022).

'She has what Zuckerberg does not have', says Au, 'a brand and an aesthetic and almost … a worldview that literally millions and millions of people … have … in their mind and that they share with people' (Nyce, 2022). Her net worth (property, cars, merchandising, albums, concerts, endorsements, Spotify and Instagram sponsored posts) underpinning it all, and growing annually, is astronomical (Lawrence, 2023).

Of her song 'Anti-hero' on the *Midnights* album, Swift says in a video posted to Instagram, I really don't think I've delved this far into my insecurities in this detail before. 'I struggle with the idea that my life has become unmanageably sized and I – not to sound too dark – but I just struggle with the idea of not feeling like a person. '(Ahlgrim, 2022)

Although we tend to take such angsty remarks from celebrities as marketing advertorials, in this case the words seem credible because Swift has created a massive, entirely self-focused artistic marketplace with distinctive norms and expectations, aesthetic products drawn from years of self-exposure, and millions of devoted fans, of which she is directress, beneficiary and slave. Callie Ahlgrim sees it as tragic that 'Taylor Swift is not a person: Taylor Swift is a brand' and 'expected to mine her trauma and self-loathing for our entertainment', a duty she fulfils 'exceptionally well' despite (or perhaps because of) feeling 'conflicted about it' (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022b).

We could speculate that if Shakespeare were alive now he might have an affinity with Swift's celebrity angst, because his brand has, like hers, grown into an extraordinary, global industry off the back of his creative and commercial talents, but he is spared the conflicted subjectivity of being 'unmanageably sized' by being dead. Swift has no such luxury, and must co-exist with her gargantuan brand to a degree such that she lives as much outside herself as within, simultaneously driven by and driving her life-as-business. I think viewing this as a tragedy is oversimplifying what is really an extraordinary cultural achievement that exemplifies Swift's impressive personal creativity and thorough embeddedness in the capitalist marketplace. This dual positioning is not without contradictions, but we do Swift an injustice to think she is unaware of this, not least because *Midnights* is in fact a direct exploration of the problem. Shakespeare's sonnets might also be considered, in their own way, an engagement with the conundrum of individual talent's vexed position in the capitalist marketplace, as I hope will become clear below.

Biographical details pepper the songs on *Midnights*, as they do all of Swift's albums, and the fraught tale of an imploding dual self in 'Anti-hero' is retold from a more optimistic perspective in 'Sweet nothing', which reveals how commercially crushed personhood finds succour in a caring domestic bubble. If that bubble had its initial reality in her long-term relationship with partner Joe Alwyn, as was widely assumed, it now floats free in the wake of that relationship's demise, which occurred as her global stocks were soaring with the dropping of *Midnights* and the start of the Eras Tour. If the existence of 'Sweet nothing' as real-time, poetic self-revelation illuminated the just-manageable challenge of being a person within a relentlessly expanding commercial machine, its persistence beyond the duration of the nourishing relationship at its core seems like poignant testament to the ultimate unmanageability of this conundrum. It is reasonable to imagine Swift is both proud of and troubled by the expansion and turning-inside-out of herself during the generation of her impressive discography, commercial success and vast community of adoring fans who are paradoxically always both outside and under her skin.

It is exhausting for me to browse the Swiftiverse, because there's so much of her and so many engaged consumers devotedly consuming her, but crucially, it is not exhausting for those who find their passionate affinity spaces there. Swifties of all stripes are drawn to these vortices by their own desires; like kids at a carnival they stay and play as long as they can, and when they have to leave they return swiftly to play some more. You generally can't say this of poetry classes at school. Yet Swift is, in so many ways, a significant ally of poetry teaching at school.

'Longtime fans of Taylor Swift don't just consume her music, videos, and red-carpet appearances', Kevin Hurler (2009) explains; 'they dissect them with laboratory-grade precision'. Or, we might say, they subject them to intensive close reading and debate, because the language of the discipline of English is a better fit with Swift's interests than lab work. Swift is known for her well-devised storytelling and engaging imagery; she sees herself as a talented lyricist who works both solo and collaboratively within, across and against genres (Sloan, 2021). Her songs allude to classic works of literature such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Rebecca*, *Alice's adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, Romantic poetry and more (Little, 2022; Riley, 2022; Dolan, 2023; McCausland, 2023; Short, 2023). Her hit song 'Love story' from *Fearless* (2008) famously

appropriates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and her final song on the *Midnights* 3am Edition, 'Dear reader', aligns listening to songs with the reading of texts. In her acceptance speech for the Nashville Songwriter-Artist of the Decade Award in 2022, Swift revealed that she thinks of her songwriting in three styles, according to the type of imaginary pen she holds during composition: 'Quill' style 'if the words and phrasings are antiquated', as if inspired by reading classic literature or seeing period movies; 'Fountain pen' style, which relies on 'a modern storyline or references, with a poetic twist'; and 'Glitter gel pen' style, which is 'frivolous, carefree, bouncy, syncopated perfectly to the beat' (Rahman, 2022). Apple Music has official Swift playlists for each style, and fans have made their own on YouTube and elsewhere. Swift's self-conscious love of wordcraft is epitomised in her declaration on receiving her Honorary Doctorate from New York University: 'we are all literary chameleons and I think it's fascinating' (Logan, 2022). Shakespeare, too, is a literary chameleon, composing his artworks within and against generic expectations associated with sonnets, narrative poems, comedies, histories and tragedies.

Mark Forsyth (Short, 2023) praises Swift's use of rhetorical figures such as chiasmus, polyptoton, epistrophe and anaphora, and, while downplaying parallels with Shakespeare, says that '[i]f her songs are like anything of his, then they're like the sonnets'. Stephen Short (2023) builds on Forsyth's rhetorical focus by mentioning Shakespeare's Fair Youth, Dark Lady and Rival Poet, and asking, 'Is it all so very different from Taylor, Joe Alwyn and Matty Healy right now?' Professor Elizabeth Scala (2022) teaches Swift's songs in relation to canonical literature at the University of Texas, including exploring 'metaphors, similes and colours' in Sonnet 73 and the song 'Red' from the album *Red* (2012). Angourie Rice (2021) discusses Sonnet 35 as a breakup poem comparable to the song 'I knew you were trouble' from *Red*, and Maarit Haarala (2021) compares figurative love language in twelve Shakespeare sonnets and fifteen Swift songs from 2010–20.

In the Vogue video interview *73 questions with Taylor Swift*, when asked 'If you could teach one subject in school what would it be?' Swift fires back emphatically, '*English!*' (Vogue, 2016). She partnered with Scholastic in 2011 to donate 6,000 books to Reading Public Library, Philadelphia, and again in 2015 to donate 25,000 books to New York City schools as part of a

reading advocacy program in which she spoke with schoolchildren, recommended books such as *Stargirl*, the *Harry Potter* series and *The fault in our stars*, and put her name to a classroom resource document to help with teaching writing (Scholastic, n.d.). She considers herself a literature person, a poetic artist, a lover of reading and wordcraft: these things matter to her and to her self-understanding as a role model for young people.

Swift also responds to Swifties' desire for gameplay by feeding them intriguing aesthetic puzzles and clues. She used TikTok in this way – pleasing by teasing – to advertise *Midnights* before its release via her '*Midnights* mayhem with me'. In Hurler's (2022) view, '[i]t's manipulative on Swift's part and obsessive on SwiftTok's part, but both parties win: Swift is able to keep her fans engaged … and SwiftTok is able to have some fun playing detective'. Swift herself is 'obsessive' about communicating via 'Easter eggs', and confides that 'the best messages are the cryptic ones' (Hurler, 2022). Quantity is important too: she gleefully says the music video for track nine, 'Bejeweled', contains a 'psychotic amount' of messages (Kheraj, 2022). Kheraj (2022) observes that she is not the only one in pop culture '[t]urning artistic expression into a multiplayer game … But few are as adept at it as Swift'.

The Swiftiverse is so artistically dense and multidimensional that fans have innumerable ways of engaging with it. From the perspective of English teaching, two broad modes of activity that thrive in Swiftie passionate affinity spaces are of special importance. The first, as the preceding paragraphs make clear, is the close reading of song lyrics, videos, clothing and concerts. Intertextual and contextual analyses build on one another and produce contestable, evidence-based interpretations, theories and readings. This includes the unwrapping of 'Easter eggs' and the relating of songs to other songs, authorial biography and topical issues around politics, feminism, sexuality, identity, trauma and the environment. The second is personal appropriation and communal sharing of phrases, concepts and behaviour arising from Swift and the Swiftiverse. This includes, for example, the viral spread of the (often ironically deployed) *mea culpa* meme 'I'm the problem, it's me' from the chorus of 'Anti-hero' (Clark, 2022) or the creation and trading of friendship bracelets by young fans in response to the bridge in 'You're on your own, kid', where the idea of being on one's own is transformed from a negative dismissal to a positive embrace of one's unique identity

('So make the friendship bracelets, / Take the moment and taste it / You've got no reason to be afraid') (Allingham, 2023).

The close reading and personal appropriation/ communal sharing occurring within passionate affinity spaces associated with Swift are creative and energetic, individual and collaborative, engaging and empowering. It is identity work: textual analysis skills are used and developed in ways that are fun and gamified, and community is nurtured by self-affirming and friendship building activities that arise freely from fan driven textual engagement. In summary: the artwork is analysed and lived. If teachers can value these sorts of affinity-space activities as relevant to the poetry classroom, even when focused on canonical verse, they may be able to create educational activities enabling students to feel more engaged in the experience of poetry.

In being product, game and person, Swift epitomises the entrepreneurial self which is the incarnation of 'neoliberal rationality' (Brown, 2020, pp. 17–45; see also Sloan, 2021). Such a self, Wendy Brown (2022) explains, is always and everywhere a 'market actor', and is not just a product of the capitalist world-economy or an individual focused on endless accrual of more capital, but as consequence of all this, is capital itself (pp. 33–35). 'Within neoliberal rationality', Brown (2022) writes, 'human capital is both our "is" and our "ought" – what we are said to be, what we should be, and what the rationality makes us into through its norms and the construction of environments' (p. 36). Every piece of Taylor Swift is capital in a public marketplace, and her success in making herself *the business* delivers her financial riches, enables others to become rich by inhabiting 'environments' she creates, and models the thriving neoliberal self as an aspiration for countless adoring fans and schoolchildren.

'Human capital's constant and ubiquitous aim', according to Brown (2022), 'is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking' (p. 36), and Swift exemplifies this even as her songs explicitly register the human cost of being human capital. Capitalism funds her affinity spaces and neoliberalism drives them; no wonder she feels 'unmanageably sized' and not quite 'a person', because her expansion as capital depends on her attenuation as person. Authenticity is her trademark and she feeds the roaring fire of her success with every element of her identity and history that will burn: we might call this her *authenticity commodity*, a phrase I intend as insolubly

paradoxical. It permeates all the songs on *Midnights* and grounds the album's concept like an alibi.

Authenticity in Swift's case is also affinity. Authenticity in art can take myriad forms, some of which are intensely off-putting. Swift's mode is broad relatability, especially for young female fans. This is partly due to her extensive sharing of the loneliness and insecurities she experienced as a child and young adult – traumatic memories that she continues to deal with as a uniquely successful public figure. It is also due to her powerful, and thus empowering, musical and business expression of a female perspective on the gender biases of a patriarchal world. She is a highly articulate, talented, female megastar with deep vulnerabilities: this subjectivity is authentically inspiring, yet also the epitome of desirable success in Brown's neoliberal paradigm.

Swift is so relatable that fans often discuss her songs as direct expressions of her feelings, thoughts and experiences, and moreover, claim that these match the feelings, thoughts and experiences of the fans themselves. In reviewing the bonus tracks on the '3am edition', for example, Courteney Larocca says of 'Would've, could've, should've' that '[b]y excavating her own trauma, Swift ruthlessly digs up mine too' (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022b). Sherry Toh (2022) declares that 'the beauty of Swift's writing is its relatability', and explains that while 'Anti-hero' refers to Swift feeling 'herself aging in an entertainment industry obsessed with youth and her monumental fame … the verse [about monstrosity] reminds me of my life with SMA [spinal muscular atrophy] – specifically my hunchback and wheelchair'. Tara Chittenden (2013) describes how quite young female fans identify deeply with songs that speak from the position of women looking back on experiences of life, love and heartbreak that they have not yet had: she calls this 'reverse nostalgia'. It is empowering (they test-run life with a trusted guide who sings so impactfully about it); it is also entrapping (they co-shape their lives via marketised discourses prepared by a multimillionaire celebrity). Rice (2021) exemplifies 'reverse nostalgia' when she describes how Swift's songs gave her 11-year-old self 'permission to feel any pent-up anger and frustration without the fear of being deemed unlikable' and how, years later, after the experience of break-ups, they continue to function similarly. Swift's relatability is essential to her authenticity commodity, and ensures that a particularly intense form of affinity flourishes at the heart of passionate affinity spaces associated with her.

Spencer Kornhaber (2022) is right when he says that 'That knack for relatability is her superpower'.

Pointing at Shakespeare and Swift

In the preceding section I surveyed Swift's celebrity subjectivity and literary credentials through the notion of affinity spaces, and found this pointing us to Shakespeare's sonnets, literary analysis and the poetry classroom. In this section I turn to a specific definition of 'pointing' explored in Chapter 6 of Gert J.J. Biesta's *World-centred education: A view for the present* (2022). Biesta (2022) draws on the work of Klaus Prange, which remains largely untranslated into English, to argue 'that the basic gesture of teaching is that of trying to (re)direct the attention of the student to something' (p. 77) noting that Prange identifies 'pointing' as 'the basic "structure" of the gesture of teaching' (p. 78). Biesta's (2022) summary gets to the heart of the matter: 'What is important here is that pointing has a double orientation, in that it is always directed *at something* – "Look *there*!" – and at the same time orientated *to someone* – "*You*, look there!"' (p. 78).

It should be uncontroversial that a teacher has a role to play in gaining the attention of students for the purpose of (re)directing it ethically towards something in particular. Such pointing preserves the expertise and authority of the teacher and at the same time promotes the identity and subjectivity of the student. This is because, according to Biesta (2022), 'the existential work of education is first and foremost *interruptive*' (p. 36). What he means is as follows. The teacher is a non-authoritarian, external authority who has something to offer in the classroom because students need something coming from outside themselves to prompt a pause for reflection on their interests, desires and relations to the world (Biesta, 2017). The teacher in the classroom, especially the arts and humanities classroom, is of value as the one who puts questions to students vis-à-vis the world, not to predetermine their responses but to cause them to pause to consider and re-evaluate, and thus to find or develop their responses and their selves. Biesta (2022) explains this 'pedagogy of interruption' thus:

> It interrupts the being-with-oneself, it interrupts identity, it interrupts flourishing, it interrupts growth, it even interrupts learning. Such interruptions are not meant to destroy the self, to deny identity, to stop flourishing, or to hinder growth and learning. They are meant to call the I who is trying to be, who is trying to be someone, who is trying to flourish, grow and learn *into the world*,

so we might say; they are meant to call the 'I' into its *own* existence, bearing in mind that it is entirely up to the 'I' to decide how to respond to the call. The work of the 'I,' after all, is ultimately and radically the work of the 'I' itself. It is the work that no one else can do for the 'I'. (pp. 36–37)

Biesta lays out the interruptive role of the teacher in greater detail in his book *The rediscovery of teaching* (2017) where he argues that teaching is 'concerned with opening up existential possibilities for students, that is, possibilities in and through which students can explore what it might mean to exist as subject in and with the world' (p. 3). This approach to teaching is 'the very *opposite* of control, the very opposite of attempts at approaching students merely as objects': it is rather, all about 'approaching students as subjects' (Biesta, 2017, p. 3).

Biesta's case for an interruptive pedagogy in which pointing is a key component is compelling because it maintains the value of the teacher in the classroom while eschewing authoritarianism. In terms of subject English, it is also a beguiling picture of how adults can, by confronting young people with texts they may not otherwise encounter, invite them to pause and reflect on their own understanding of self and world, and develop more complex personal trajectories in light of encounters with the other. This is valuable; however, English teachers also need to guard against adopting a rigidly binary sense of teacher and student roles and enforcing through authoritarian pointing a rigidly canonical text list on the grounds that it will always be good for students to encounter it.

Teachers in educational institutions have been pointing students to Shakespeare for centuries, and, in the best scenarios, inviting engagement with and exploration of the text (or playable script, if you prefer) rather than receipt and regurgitation of set ideas about it. It may indeed be valuable to capture the attention of students immersed in pop culture texts and affinity spaces such as the Swiftiverse, and redirect their attention to canonical literature such as Shakespeare's sonnets because the resulting encounter is considered good for their literary understanding and personal growth. However, in this essay, I am arguing that if we think of passionate affinity spaces and school spaces as relatively distinct, and if we positively value the analytical and identity work occurring in affinity spaces, then it is perfectly reasonable and educationally pragmatic to facilitate bidirectional pointing whereby Swift's *Midnights* points meaningfully to Shakespeare's

sonnets and the sonnets point meaningfully to *Midnights*. The adjustment to Biesta's approach that I am effecting here is in order to achieve something of a rapprochement between his view and Gee and Hayes's view. Rather than simply using teacherly authority to arrest student attention and redirect it to Shakespeare's sonnets, I want to validate student activity in Swiftie affinity spaces by pointing both student *and* teacher to the way *Midnights* and Shakespeare's Sonnets point to each other.

This sort of pointing is mutually enriching in multiple ways, because both teachers and students learn about other texts and the transferability of English skills at the same time as *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets are illuminated by the questions they put to each other. This is, of course, a strategy to help teachers teach poetry in class because it draws energy from passionate affinity spaces, but not a cynical strategy, because it acknowledges that Swift's songwriting is complex enough to repay detailed analysis and thus serve the purpose of subject English, as well as the fact that such analysis *is already occurring* outside school bounds, thus authentically demonstrating the relevance of English skills. In this version of pointing, student attention isn't so much arrested and redirected as it is expanded to see that what they are doing in affinity spaces is valid English work that can incorporate Shakespeare as well as Taylor Swift – and the teacher's attention is, in complementary fashion, expanded the other way. According to Prange (Biesta, 2022), for pointing to be meaningful and ethical, it should be 'understandable' (comprehensible, truthful), 'appropriate' (suitable to the students, respectful of them, accessible for them) and 'connectable' (meaningful for students to receive into their own lives and continue with in their own ways) (pp. 85–86). It seems to me that these conditions might be fulfilled by understanding pointing less as a unidirectional 'interruption' of student thought and more as a collaborative expansion of student and teacher thought.

In the remainder of this section, I want to present a foundational paradigm for understanding how *Midnights* and the sonnets might be thought of as pointing to each other. In the next section I will build on this with a more fine-grained exploration of poetic bridges between the texts.

Theon Weber observes that 'being told What Songs Mean is like having a really pushy professor. And it imperils a true appreciation of Swift's talent, which is not confessional, but dramatic: Like a procession of

country songwriters before her, she creates characters and situations – some from life – and finds potent ways to describe them' (Weber, 2010; cf. Pence, 2011, on country music and Shakespeare's sonnets). Although Weber wrote this before Swift's shift to pop – and long before *Midnights*, which does present itself as 'confessional', his point still holds because *Midnights* is fundamentally dramatic. The selves Swift meets at midnight and reveals in each song are dramatically performed characters.

Something similar may be said of Shakespeare's sonnets, which gesture towards figures such as rival poets (Sonnets 80, 85–86), the Fair Youth (Sonnets 15–16, 20, 126), the Dark Lady (Sonnets 127, 130–132) and the ageing speaker himself (Sonnets 73, 134, 147), and adumbrate situations such as discovering, suspecting or admitting to betrayal in love (Sonnets 33–35, 109–110, 144), and wrestling with the experience of lust (Sonnet 129), self-love (Sonnet 62), inadequacy (Sonnet 87), disappointment and reputational damage (Sonnets 29–30, 94–96), and artistic self-doubt (Sonnets 79–80, 85–86). *Midnights* is simultaneously dramatic and confessional, and so are the sonnets, which Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells (2020) consider a 'collection of often highly personally inflected poems' through which Shakespeare chose 'to work out his intimate thoughts and feelings' (pp. 15–16). In both cases, it is the highly personal inflection of technically accomplished genre work that vivifies the artworks.

Yet there's a crucial difference here between the two artists: while Swift prioritises the story in the song, Shakespeare prioritises the argument in the sonnet. This does not mean Swift's songs are without arguments (they do contain theses), nor that Shakespeare's sonnets are without stories (they do contain narratives). What I mean is that Swift foregrounds story, with argument being present more covertly in her songs, and Shakespeare foregrounds argument, with story being present more covertly in his sonnets. This isn't true in every case, but it is true enough to be interesting. I call it the 'ShakeSwift inversion'. It arises from the fact that Swift's songs are grounded in affective storytelling – as we might expect from someone with country music heritage – and Shakespeare's sonnets are grounded in rhetorical argument, as we might expect from someone working in the early modern English sonnet tradition. This is why her fans ask what a song is about and then debate the details of the story, while his readers ask what the argument is and then debate the details of the

thesis. Swift will aim to tell her story with emotional force, succinctness and musical distinctiveness (each song has its own musical identity). Shakespeare will aim to deliver his argument with intellectual force, succinctness and rhetorical distinctiveness (each poem has its own rhetorical identity). I'm not saying argument and story are fully separable, though; more that the ShakeSwift inversion highlights where the emphasis lies in each artist's case.

Swift (2019) says she loves writing songs because she loves preserving memories, just like taking photographs. Using 'nostalgia as inspiration', she wants to capture precise experiential moments from the past – 'the temperature of the air, the creak of the floorboards, the time on the clock when your heart was stolen or shattered or healed or claimed forever' (Swift, 2019). She explains how this works:

> The fun challenge of writing a pop song is squeezing those evocative details into the catchiest melodic cadence you can possibly think of. I thrive on the challenge of sprinkling personal mementos and shreds of reality into a genre of music that is universally known for being, well, universal.
>
> You'd think that as pop writers, we're supposed to be writing songs that everyone can sing along to, so you'd assume they would have to be pretty lyrically generic … AND YET the ones I think cut through the most are actually the most detailed, and I don't mean in a Shakespearean sonnet type of way, although I love Shakespeare as much as the next girl. Obviously. (See 'Love Story,' 2008). (Swift, 2019)

Swift is describing, and knows the power of, the authenticity commodity: 'sprinkling personal mementos and shreds of reality' through 'the catchiest melodic cadence you can possibly think of' achieves the Holy Grail of emotional and commercial 'cut through'. This works because 'these days, people are reaching out for connection and comfort in the music they listen to' rather than desiring 'pop music' that is impersonal and 'generic' (Swift, 2019).

Fascinatingly, she thinks of Shakespeare's sonnets in this context and recognises that they are also richly 'detailed', but in a different way. In respect to Shakespeare, I think by 'detailed' she means the linguistic intricacy and rhetorical complexity of the sonnets, which mean that it's often quite a challenge to fully understand their argument. By contrast, her songs are packed with 'evocative details' of biography and story which strike the listener with vivid immediacy. In other words, she's pointing to the phenomenon I'm identifying as the ShakeSwift inversion.

Poetic bridges between *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets

So, what have *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets in common as collections? Plenty. They are loosely unified assemblages of genre-determined artworks focusing on love and related ideas at the core of human experience and enriched by a roughly comparable 'I', a metapoetical interest, and an insoluble union of fact and fiction. This breaks down into the following five points.

(1) *Each is a genre-based collection of short, intricately constructed, poetic artworks held in loose and generative relation to one another by an overarching concept and shared thematics.* Intense self-reflexion, in all its contradictoriness, arising around the midnight hour is the unifying concept of *Midnights* according to Swift, and intense self-reflexion, in all its contradictoriness, arising through the Petrarchan sonnet tradition is the unifying theme of Shakespeare's sonnets. Sonneteering within the Petrarchan tradition is always about the sweetness and terror of searching (for) the self, and Swift presents *Midnights* similarly as 'a journey through terrors and sweet dreams' as we 'go searching – hoping that just maybe, when the clock strikes twelve … we'll meet ourselves' (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022a). An effective exercise for students is to compare the melancholic and tormented midnight reflections of 'Anti-hero' with Sonnet 27, in which the weary, lovelorn speaker is given no rest 'in bed' as he endures 'a journey in my head / To work my mind' (ll. 1–4) and, haunted by his beloved's jewel-like 'shadow', can 'no quiet find' (ll. 9–14). Sonnet 61 extends these ideas and enables a more complex comparison because of its darker vocabulary and tone.

The songs and sonnets don't come together in a single, linear storyline in their collections, but rather present multiple entry points for the diverse experience of facets of a shared thematic. This means each song and sonnet is perfectly capable of separating from the collection and accruing different meanings as a standalone piece or contributor to other artistic contexts.

Midnights arose from a swirling development process that included the creation of 21 songs and involved collaboration with fellow artists and the creative and commercial talents of high-profile producers Jack Antonoff and Aaron Dessner. The standard *Midnights* album comprises 13 tracks, while the so-called '3am digital edition' contains those 13 along with an additional seven tracks which Swift describes as 'other songs we wrote on our journey to find that magic 13' (Swift as cited in Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022b). There's also an eighth bonus song, 'Hits different', which is a unique feature of the Lavender edition of *Midnights* exclusive to Target stores. The *Midnights* 'Til dawn edition,' released on Amazon Music in 2023, includes all the preceding releases and two remixes – a total of 23 tracks. With all these songs spilling out into various

editions, it is important for Swift to clarify that 'I think of *Midnights* as a complete concept album, with those 13 songs forming the full picture of the intensities of that mystifying, mad hour' (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022b). As with Shakespeare's sonnets, there is a distinct and meaningful collection (the 13, the 154) surrounded by an array of additional pieces that are neither unrelated, nor fully within the set. The core 13 are a suite of 'intensities' arising from the self-reflection one experiences in the middle of the night when the world quietens down and one can think in depth – or cannot avoid thinking in depth – about one's life experiences. Here again we see the authenticity commodity: Swift is mythologising and marketing simultaneously because *Midnights* capitalises on her long-term signalling of the mystical significance of the number 13 to her life (taylorswiftfans, 2009) and yet seems infinitely expandable as a product.

Ahlgrim complains that the 'architecture' of *Midnights* is 'a mostly flat plane', lacking 'texture,' 'tension' and 'cohesion,' especially when seen beside *Folklore* (2020) and *Evermore* (2020) which are 'her most fascinating *and* most cohesive albums' (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022a). This criticism highlights not just the 'beautiful banality' of *Midnights*, to use Kornhaber's term, but more importantly the looseness of its coherency, which is a defining trait of many early modern sonnet collections including Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare's definitive 154 sonnets came together out of a decades-long creative process that included numerous other sonnets embedded in his early plays and the commercial initiative of high-profile publisher Thomas Thorpe. The volume *SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS: Neuer before Imprinted* (1609) is complete, but circulating around it are the additional 28 sonnets identified by Edmondson and Wells (2020) and the remixed second edition of the collection published by John Benson (1640), which adds poem titles and poems by others like a Spotify shuffled playlist. All of Shakespeare's sonnets are able to function as standalone pieces outside the ambit of the 1609 collection. Scholarly tradition has imposed a broad sense of structure on the book's fairly flat 'architecture' characterised by loose cohesiveness. The well-rehearsed story is that Sonnets 1–126 address the male Fair Youth, Sonnets 127–152 deal with the Dark Lady and Sonnets 153–154 speak of Cupid, but this gives a false sense of cohesion that is easy to upset. Edmondson and Wells (2020) summarise the expansive array of themes addressed throughout Shakespeare's sonnets and tabulate the 19 'pairs of sonnets' and 14 'mini-sequences' that criss-cross the set of 154 poems and characterise its complementary looseness and cohesion (pp. 16–20).

A way to explore these sorts of internal structures in the classroom would be to ask students to consider if they can find pairs or mini-sequences of songs on *Midnights*. They could compare two songs on *Midnights* with each other, or two of Shakespeare's sonnets with each other, to analyse varied approaches to similar

themes. Diehard Swift fans among your students may wish to compare specific *Midnights* songs with songs from Swift's earlier albums to explore her revisitation and transformation of themes. For example, 'Maroon' could be compared with 'Red' from *Red* (2012) or 'Dress' from *Reputation* (2017) (Ahlgrim, 2022); 'Vigilante shit' with 'I did something bad' from *Reputation* (Ahlgrim, 2022); 'Would've, could've, should've' with 'Dear John' from *Speak now* (2010); 'Mastermind' with 'Invisible string' from *Folklore* (2020) (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022a); and 'Bejeweled' with 'Mirrorball' from *Folklore* (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022a). If Swift is revisiting songs and ideas, however, the same is true of Shakespeare: students could compare multiple sonnets addressing the Fair Youth (18 and 35), the Dark Lady (130 and 144), time (55 and 126), Cupid (153 and 154), or any of the other topics featuring in the pairs and mini-sequences tabulated by Edmondson and Wells (2020, pp. 18–19).

(2) *While the unifying preoccupation of each collection is self-reflexivity, both artists manifest it via a primary interest in the exploration of love.* This is a capacious topic which includes loving and hating oneself, loving or betraying the love of others, being loved or betrayed by others, and loving or hating objects, experiences, choices and ideas. Every one of Swift's songs on *Midnights*, including its eight additional tracks, and every one of Shakespeare's sonnets, including the 28 outside of the collection, deal in one way or another with love. This is no surprise because love and self-reflexivity co-define the field of play for country music, pop music and Petrarchan sonneteering.

(3) *In dealing with love, the songs and sonnets inevitably deal with a limited set of related themes that are equally profound: power and powerlessness, destiny or fate, and the passage of time.* The stories being told and arguments being made in the songs and sonnets inevitably interrogate the human experience of power, fate and time without relinquishing the broader frameworks of love and self-reflexivity.

(4) *In* Midnights *and Shakespeare's sonnets there is an indeterminable blending of the biographically authentic and personal with the fictional and abstract.* The collections are like startling kaleidoscopes of artificiality and authenticity, which fascinate audiences and readers with their continual repatterning of these values. Swift asserts the importance of introjecting 'personal mementos and shreds of reality' into her work, a claim that gains special resonance with *Midnights*, while Edmondson and Wells claim the sonnets are 'often highly personally inflected' (Edmondson & Wells, 2020, p. 15). For example, in 'Sweet nothing', Swift refers to holidaying in Ireland with her then partner Alwyn in 2021, while in Sonnet 145, Shakespeare refers to courting his wife Anne Hathaway in 1582. Such idiosyncratic investment by both artists never turns into transparent prose or bland demarcation of the borders between fact and fiction.

(5) *Swift and Shakespeare weave into their songs and poems a roughly comparable singing and speaking 'I' and a metapoetical interest.* This means their artworks often explicitly signal that they are artworks, or point back to the poet or songwriter busily constructing the story. *Midnights* is conceptually about an accomplished songstress reflecting on her life and loves, and Shakespeare's sonnets are conceptually about an accomplished poet reflecting on his life and loves. Both frequently allude to a wider world characterised by power dynamics, turbulent relationships and market forces. Yet in light of point (4) above, it is crucial to keep in mind that the songstress and poet who emerge from their songs and poems in these collections are never simply the real Swift and Shakespeare, but always some fictive avatar of indeterminable proximity to reality. In fact, Shakespeare's sonnets is the ideal canonical text for Swiftie students with their well-honed 'Easter-egg' hunting skills, because there's much to enjoy in decoding the characters and their relationships within the sonnets, and the enigmatic dedication to 'Mr W.H.' which continues to provoke and perplex scholars (Shakespeare, 2010, pp. 44–69, 109).

Songwriting and poetry writing feature as explicit activities in these collections, and the self who sings and writes is explicitly suggested to be the real author(ess): 'it's me!' cries Swift in 'Anti-hero', and 'my name is Will' declares Shakespeare in Sonnet 136 (l. 14). In 'Dear Reader', the final track on the '3am Edition', Swift warns, 'if it feels like a trap, / You're already in one' and 'Never take advice from someone who's falling apart', words that could come just as easily from the cunning yet anxiety-riven speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets. It may be surprising to realise that the confessional singer of *Midnights* and the confessional speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets are both professionally aware, self-consciously ageing, radically multifaceted, deeply insecure, socially satirical and artistically accomplished personae.

Midnights and Shakespeare's sonnets are both 'a journey in my head' (Sonnet 27, l. 3), and students could be asked to discuss what they feel are the defining traits of this journey in each collection. In the process, they should consider what seems conventional or innovative in the artworks, and what sorts of audiences they are aimed at or appeal to. Relatedly, they could compile their own 'concept album' of Shakespeare's sonnets by selecting a limited number – say, five to thirteen sonnets – arranging them in the order they prefer and explaining this 'architecture' both on its own terms and in relation to the order of songs on Swift's album.

Having pointed to some shared principles, structures and thematics between *Midnights* and Shakespeare's Sonnets to orient us to their affinities, I will conclude this essay with an array of poetic bridges between the

songs and sonnets to prompt a form of close reading that keeps Shakespeare and Swift in conversation with each other.

Shakespeare's sonnets have made famous the so-called English sonnet structure which subdivides the 14 lines of the sonnet into three quatrains, usually rhymed *abab cdcd efef*, followed by a concluding couplet rhymed *gg*. Often the sonnets develop a logical argument through the three quatrains and wrap things up at the end with a neatly expressed or proverbial couplet. At some point along the way, however, many sonnets include a significant 'turn' or pivot in the argument, which in the Italian sonnet form – usually an octave followed by a sestet – regularly occurs as a *volta* at the start of the sestet in line nine. One beauty of the English form is that it allows clearer gradations of argument and opportunities for building neat clusters of imagery in parallel or series, but may nonetheless include a turn at line nine, or at line 13, or even line 14, or elsewhere.

Students can be asked to explore how argument and imagery evolve through quatrains in Sonnets 18 and 73, or more complexly in Sonnets 29, 106, 116 and 144. Once familiar with this basic structure, students could be encouraged to explore variations in Sonnets 66 (no quatrains), 87 (hypermetrical), 99 (15 lines), 126 (12 lines) and 129 (submerged or dissolved quatrains). Students could look through the lyrics of *Midnights* and seek recurring patterns to understand structures that often include a number of verses, usually of multiple lines, separated by a recurrent chorus, and often adorned by a pre-chorus that follows the verse and builds towards the chorus, post-chorus that follows the chorus and extends its energy and bridge, which delivers fresh content to enrich or transform the song beyond its current lyrical and musical state.

While Shakespeare writes brilliant quatrains that carry his argument, Swift is known for her superb bridges that deepen her stories. Ask students to explore the impact of the bridges in 'You're on your own, kid' ('From sprinkler splashes … no reason to be afraid'), 'Karma' ('Ask me … I'm still here'), 'Sweet nothing' ('Industry disruptors … too soft for all of it'), 'Mastermind' ('No one wanted … 'cause I care') or 'Dear reader' ('So I wander … playing solitaire'). These all significantly shift or uplift their songs, and they have much in common with each other. It is especially revealing to ask how each song would change without its bridge.

Just as Shakespeare inserts a crucial 'turn' at various points in the arguments of his sonnets, Swift often incorporates a crucial 'turn' in the stories of her songs. Students could explore how the story turn works in 'Maroon', 'Mastermind', 'The great war' and 'You're on your own, kid', and think about how the argument turn occurs earlier in Sonnets 18, 35 and 126, and later in Sonnets 30, 60, 73, 116, and 130. Some of Swift's songs lack a turn and instead dwell on one single moment or idea, including 'Karma', 'Glitch', 'Snow on the beach' and 'Bigger than the whole sky'. Sonnets 55 (on the beloved immortalised in rhyme), 66 (on being wearied by the world's corruption) and 129 (on lust) express a similar conceptual unity.

A distinctive way in which Swift delivers a turn in the story is via a revised version of the chorus or an earlier verse. This makes the listening experience more stimulating as familiar phrases morph and echo each other in, for example, 'Maroon' ('When the morning came … And I chose you … When the silence came … And I lost you'), 'You're on your own, kid' ('You're on your own, kid / You always have been … You're on your own, kid / Yeah, you can face this') and 'Mastermind' ('I laid the groundwork, and then / Just like clockwork / The dominoes cascaded in a line … I laid the groundwork, and then / Saw a wide smirk on your face / You knew the entire time'). Sometimes she shifts the pronouns to effect a shift of point of view, as in 'Vigilante shit' ('I don't start shit, but I can tell you how it ends. .. She don't start shit, but she can tell you how it ends'). These manoeuvres remind us that Swift uses rhetorical figures particularly to do with repetition and near-repetition of sounds, word-forms and phrases (Short, 2023).

In the sonnets, Shakespeare deploys myriad rhetorical figures which depend on repetition and near-repetition of words and sounds within lines, quatrains and couplets which are often tied to the progression of stages of argument, and include grammatical variations (Sonnets 8, 12, 18, 66, 73, 87, 129). These sound effects, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Semler, 2013), prove that the sonnets are to be read out loud and function as sonic events unfolding through time just as Swift's songs occur orally-aurally through time. Swift and Shakespeare share an interest in using apostrophe and rhetorical questions to grant songs ('Question …?', 'Bejeweled', 'Mastermind', 'Would've, could've, should've', 'Dear reader') and sonnets (Sonnets 4, 8, 18, 43, 76) greater impact and liveliness.

Table 1. Points of comparison for analysing Swift's songs on *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets.

	Point of comparison	In *Midnights*	In Shakespeare's sonnets
1	How artistically successful are the extended metaphors?	'Snow on the beach' 'The great war' 'Glitch'	Sonnets 8, 18, 80, 143, 147
2	How artistically successful are the series of short metaphors?	'Labyrinth' 'Karma' 'Mastermind'	Sonnets 65, 73, 95, 96
3	How are intimate partnerships characterised and what stands outside or against them?	'Lavender haze' 'Snow on the beach' 'Labyrinth' 'Sweet nothing' 'Mastermind' 'The great war' 'Paris' 'Hits different'	Sonnets 29, 75, 116, 130, 138
4	How are shared weaknesses represented?	'Maroon' 'The great war' 'High infidelity'	Sonnets 93, 109, 110, 120, 138
5	How does the speaker respond to relationship strain, breakdown, betrayal and abuse of trust?	'Maroon' 'Bejeweled' 'Question …?' 'Vigilante shit' 'The great war' 'High infidelity' 'Would've, could've, should've' 'Hits different'	Sonnets 33, 34, 35, 42, 88, 94, 138, 144
6	How is intensity of feeling constructed and conveyed?	'Vigilante shit' 'Bigger than the whole sky' 'Paris' 'Would've, could've, should've' 'Hits different'	Sonnets 29, 66, 94, 129, 144, 147
7	How does the songwriter or poet feature in their work and what role does their gender play?	'You're on your own, kid' 'Midnight rain' 'Sweet nothing' 'Dear reader'	Sonnets 13, 18, 23, 55, 79, 80, 86
8	How are the troubles of the day artistically represented as troubling the night?	'Anti-hero' 'Would've, could've, should've' 'Dear reader'	Sonnets 27, 43, 61
9	How are negative forms of self-assessment represented?	'Anti-hero' 'High infidelity' 'Dear reader'	Sonnets 62, 86, 138
10	How effectively does the ending change what's gone before?	'Mastermind' 'You're on your own, kid'	Sonnets 29, 62, 73
11	How are the passage and power of time represented?	'Lavender haze' 'Maroon' 'You're on your own, kid' 'Midnight rain' 'Question …?' 'The great war' 'Bigger than the whole sky' 'High infidelity' 'Would've, could've, should've'	Sonnets 15, 18, 30, 60, 65, 73, 126

Swift and Shakespeare occasionally deploy long and winding sentences that hold the attention of listeners and readers because they cannot tell where things are going semantically until they arrive: ask students to find the longest sentences they can in *Midnights* (they will need to hear them sung) and Shakespeare's sonnets (consider Sonnets 66, 129, 130) and explain how they function artistically in context. This will involve exploring how Shakespeare generally adheres to grammatical sentences and punctuation, while Swift has freedom to populate her lyrics with floating phrases.

Weber (2010), writing in response to the release of Swift's third studio album *Speak now* (2010), notes that Swift 'likes using a tossed-off phrase to suggest large and serious things that won't fit in the song, things that enhance or subvert the surface narrative. She writes iceberg songs' (see also Sloan, 2021). In other words, within the necessarily tight confines of a pop song, Swift is able to point – suggestively, resonantly – to relevant story content that lies beyond the lyrics. Shakespeare shares this poetic ability to gesture beyond the horizon of the artwork. This pointing can be on a large scale (entire songs or sonnets that address undefined topics) or a small one (lines or verses pointing to undefined topics). Swift's 'Bigger than the whole sky' is a portrait of immense loss that leaves its object undefined (Ahlgrim & Larocca, 2022b) and so fans have speculated: is it about miscarriage or the death of a loved one or loss of her younger self or something else? Many of Shakespeare's sonnets (for example, Sonnets 35, 86, 94, 144) also leave story details undefined – not to mention the fundamentally undefined nature of recurrent characters such as the Fair Youth, the Dark Lady and the Rival Poet – so that readers are encouraged to introject specifics.

All of these features – quatrains and bridges, turns in story and argument, repetition and variation of sound and sense, and generative opacity or vagueness – can function as poetic bridges to help students cross back and forth between the collections. In Table 1, I provide some points of comparison between the songs and sonnets which invite students to compare songs with songs, sonnets with sonnets, and songs with sonnets.

Conclusion

The phenomenal success of Taylor Swift as a pop singer with genuine literary credentials and a vast and devoted fandom represents an opportunity for English teachers seeking to energise their teaching of canonical and poetic texts in the classroom. The character of the *Midnights* album makes it an apt complement to Shakespeare's sonnets in terms of artistic principles, thematic interests and poetic content. Given that *Midnights* and Shakespeare's sonnets possess robust aesthetic affinities and that Swifties in passionate affinity spaces engage in close reading, personal appropriation and communal sharing of the sort endorsed by subject English at school, the association seems valuable to explore. The value is both for students *and* teachers, because if teachers point not just to arrest student attention and redirect it to canonical texts but also to underscore the complementarity of canonical and pop culture texts and the transferability of English skills in and out of school spaces, then it seems like a lively educational process that will affirm the identity, skills and contributions of both parties. Teachers, students and English all win.

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Note

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Pulp Fictions:
Two Archival Accounts of the Literary Studies/ English Nexus

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Abstract: This article describes a small archival study exploring the nexus between Literary Studies and school English. The study involved analysis of the author's notes from a tertiary course in Literary Studies in 1985 and considers the relationship between this and subsequent dispositions and practices as an English teacher/English teacher educator. It provides an outline of both Literary Studies and the archive, describes the approach to analysing the archive and then offers two accounts of this process, in the form of two stories. Each of these stories gives rise to a proposed model for literary educator capability that is relevant for teachers and lecturers designing curriculum for Literary Studies, subject English or English method.

Keywords: archive, literary studies, professional learning, decolonising, inclusion, pedagogy, literature

Introduction: An archival study

This article emerges from a small archival study inspired by this journal's call for papers related to the relationship between Literary Studies and subject English. However, it aligns with a broader project exploring Australia's national textbook archive, and also with pre-existing interests in the deployment of a historical imagination in English teaching (Green & Beavis, 1996) and 'configuring an archival imaginary' (Moore, 2016, p. 130) in English curriculum studies (Green & Cormack, 2015). This is not to dwell in the past, but to better understand the present and anticipate the future for English teachers and students.

In 1985 I commenced a three-year Bachelor of Arts at Prominent University and chose to undertake not only 'English' in my first year, but also a subject called 'Literary Studies'. I use pseudonyms for the university and staff, but the study is not about them per se. It is fundamentally textual, focusing on a specific corpus of materials related to my degree, but also has a genealogical and autoethnographic bent, such that memory and identity work are called into play. This memory work relies on the archival material as prompt or trigger (Cole, 2010).

The research question energising this study asks what the relationship between Literary Studies, the subject I undertook in first year, and my work in English education might be. By 'English education' I refer both to my school teaching career and subsequent work at tertiary level with preservice English teachers. A recent Australian Research Council-funded national study (described in McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2023) hosted by the University of Melbourne has investigated the literary knowledge that English teachers bring to their work. One chapter in the book emerging from this study is devoted to this Literary Studies/English nexus, giving a historical account of how it is 'characterised by contradictions and complexities' (Doecke & Mead, 2023, p. 82). Another relevant study (Diamond & Bulfin, 2021) has explored the cultural memory of later-career English teachers like me. As a complement to these studies, I focus on providing a personal, archive-based genealogy, or history of the present, in which I am a

White female former English teacher now lecturing in English method at Deakin University, Australia.

I have kept all my notes from my Bachelor of Arts degree and my combined major in English and Fine Arts. Why focus on a single year of Literary Studies and not English, the more traditional English Literature-based course I undertook for three years? Because over the subsequent years, Literary Studies, as an assemblage of course materials, textbooks, lecturers, tutors, coursework, assignments and memories, is the resource I have returned to most often. I have barely opened my English, or indeed my English method folders or textbooks in the ensuing 40 years, whereas my Literary Studies relics are dog-eared and faded, and some of the books are even missing, as in the case of my copy of *The poet's manual and rhyming dictionary* (Stillman, 1966), as I carried it about so much. I had not really thought this through until now, but it demonstrates the closer relationship, for me, between Literary Studies and subject English than between English and subject English.

So, thinking with Foucault's genealogy, I resist merely giving an account of what Literary Studies was. Instead, I have sought traces in the archive that have made the present possible, and potentially produced me as an English teacher/teacher educator open to studying any text and particularly excited about poetry. I position this story about myself in contrast to the stories that many preservice teachers tell me about their own school or university English studies, which involve: being intimidated by texts; not knowing where to start with teaching them; having few pedagogical resources to draw on from their own literary learning; and being lost with literary terminology and devices. Teachers in these stories feel anxious about their own literary knowledge; these impressions are confirmed by empirical research (McLean Davies, 2023, p. 114). And preservice teachers are especially afraid of poetry, it would seem, as the academic literature also describes (Creely, 2019).

What was/is Literary Studies?

Any account of this subject will be inevitably partial, given that I no longer even have the course handbook as a start. However, a sheet of paper in my English folder has information about English on one side and Literary Studies on the other, echoing the oppositional positioning of these subjects. The Literary Studies page says 'how different' its booklist is from the English one, how many of its texts 'are not readily available' and how lectures will 'contain material of a kind that you may not be able to find summarised elsewhere'. Literary Studies was relatively new and had proven 'extremely popular', and while defining itself in contrast to English, coyly refused to state what this meant. This created a sense of guild-style mystery.

The clue here is the text list, which instead of being solely a list of literary works offers instead texts that deal with literature either at a meta level (*The nature of narrative*) or craft level (*The poet's manual and rhyming dictionary*), *as well as* a (brief) list of literary texts. From my notes on the introductory lecture on 4/3/1985 (we had a one-hour lecture and 90 minute tutorial each week), the three terms focused on (1) 'writing, composition, essay, diction, discourse, metaphor …'; (2) 'lit terminology – READING, comedy, tragedy, realism etc – theory v reality, TEXTS' and (3) '1st four weeks – POETRY, PROSODY-METER, FORM, RHYME, then general introd to literary critical theory'. In my tutorial notes this is more specifically structured as an introductory first week followed by

2. *No lecture [this may have been Easter or a public holiday]*
3. *Realism*
4. *Modernism*
5. *Comedy and tragedy*
6. *Macbeth*
7. *Midsummer ND*
8. *Narrative*
9. *Between the Acts*
10. *Labyrinths*

The course was led by three White female academics, and the key academic, who seemed to be in charge, was also a writer, editor and literary critic; she was a dynamic, acerbic and charismatic presence driving the course and I was both pleased and petrified to have her as my tutor as well. With a basic understanding of the framing of Literary Studies now clearer for readers, I turn to the framing for this research.

Conceptual framing for research

A key concept for this small research study, which started out with a poststructural and feminist framing, is addressivity, drawing on Elizabeth Ellsworth's (1997) work. In terms of becoming a more literate person (whatever this means), and ultimately an English teacher, how did I take up aspects of this particular form of 'Literary Studies', to be re-constituted in future performances of a teacher-self? How did the materials represented in this archive address me? What did they

enable and constrain? And how is my teacher-self intimately bound up with 'the textually-laden material world' (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 188) represented by this archive?

At the outset, I acknowledge that there is no clear linear trajectory to be mapped, and potentially replicated, between Literary Studies and my former-teacher and current-academic practices. Even at the broadest, systemic, let alone personal level, the Literary Studies/school English nexus is extremely complicated (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2020). Instead I try to suggest how traces identified through working with this archive – traces broken, inconsistent, flickering and multiple – emerge in both discursive and embodied ways over time. I am no essentialised product of my education. Every student's Literary Studies archive, every page of notes, every annotated textbook, would be different, and yet it would also contain socially realised resonances linked to curriculum and pedagogy that may predict what past education may make possible or impossible in the present.

I adopt an 'archival sensibility' (Moore et al., 2016a, p. 20) that recognises me as the collector of these archival materials, and also the creator of some. The archive here is not a discrete and definitive representation of reality or truth, as a mirror of Literary Studies. Thinking with this archive constitutes an encounter, and like any archive it is 'not innocent, but marked by selections, occlusions, exclusions, partiality, fragmentation and these pressures impact on what remains, how it is organised, accessed and worked on' (Moore et al., 2016a, p. 24). This sensibility also recognises the materiality of the archive, rather than just considering it a neutral repository for discourse.

Like Moore et al. (2016a), I tell stories of working with the archive with an ethnographic (in this case, autoethnographic given my own entanglement with the materials) and also heed their warning to avoid any 'heroic version of the researcher's subjectivity' (p 24). This might otherwise be a tale of my own aptitude as a teacher.

Method for archival research: Three readings
The two accounts given here required a reading of the materials that is different from previous contingency-based access. Guides for archival research are rare, so I follow the advice available and first describe how the archive came into being (Stanley, 2016).

After university, I kept a folder for each subject studied. These have been stored in boxes or filing cabinets in attics and basements, but are currently in a cupboard in my study, while the set texts are on an adjacent bookshelf. Keeping this material has been predicated on having access to secure, dry space. This has been difficult in tiny, rented bedsit flats and share houses, highlighting the contingency of retaining these materials over a lifetime. I kept these materials as references and as repositories of knowledge.

Having established how the archive came into being, I have adapted one series of procedures for archival research (Stanley, 2016) as follows:

1. Define the materials: I focused on a single red Unifile foolscap cardboard folder labelled '1st YEAR – 1985 Literary Studies' in thick black permanent marker and the collection of 54 paper items inside (stapled items are counted as individual items), with loose pages counted separately, consisting of mostly punched and unpunched lined white foolscap paper or photocopy paper, covered with either handwriting in blue ballpoint pen ink or black type AND the set texts for the course that I still have: *A glossary of literary terms* (Abrams, 1981), *The short story* (Reid, 1977); *The nature of narrative* (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966) and *Literary theory: An introduction* (Eagleton, 1983). *The poet's manual and rhyming dictionary* (Stillman, 1966) is currently lost, but is referenced in the materials.

2. Give an account of how the archive is organised: Apart from stapled items like essays, the materials are not organised. The archive is not in chronological order; some pages that clearly belong together are separated. Also, some items that I remember previously being in the collection are missing.

3. Describe the main contents: This folder contains: a course outline, assessment task instructions, handouts and other institutional materials; lecture and tutorial notes, notes from reading, working bibliographies, classwork, in my own and others' (non-identifiable – I cannot remember the names or faces of any peers in this subject) handwriting; assignment drafts and final assignments with markers' comments, all with annotations and other marginalia.

4. Describe any action taken: To allow for more convenient handling of these materials, I organised them into four categories: (1) institutionally produced materials; (2) lecture and tutorial notes; (3) working notes/materials; and (4) assignments.

Where possible I arranged each of these in chronological order. I read all the materials through once, to familiarise myself, then read them a second time and wrote my first account. I then read them a third time and wrote my second account. During each reading, I took detailed notes, forming a meta archive of the archive (Stanley, 2016) that formed the basis of the two accounts. I then reflected on what these accounts might mean for both Literary Studies and English education in the future.

Archival research opens a performative and dialogic space for the meeting of original writers and the researcher, from which emerges questions (Tamboukou, 2016, p. 89). For this study, this means a vast array of not only lecturers, but also the many literary figures whose work features in these heteroglossic materials. It also allows for a meeting of selves across time – or at least stories told about these selves, of student, writer, teacher, academic, none definitive and always in motion. I get a sense of myself here in this archive as a conscientious student, yet one out of my depth, pressing hard with my schoolgirl cursive handwriting, trying to ground myself by taking down the lecturer's every word. Beside Week Three on my lecture outline, I have written in pencil 'Missed' and on the notes from that week 'Copied', because I must have laboriously copied them out from someone else's by hand. This is relevant because it also suggests how institutional policy, attendance, attention and social relations shape the experience of a subject, and what is learned – there is no Literary Studies that was common to all. By later in the year, my handwriting had changed, speeding up, loosening and lightening, a process that has continued such that my handwriting today bears it no resemblance.

Through my readings of the archive, I have sought 'moments of concrescence' (Moore et al., 2016b, p. 176) when apparently separate things suddenly align, and times when I have felt a sense of what the potentials of knowing might be, rather than any sense of nailing the accuracy of representation, either of the archive or of the subject or of myself.

Pulp fictions

The two accounts that follow result from my second and third readings of and note-makings on the archival material. While the first reading enabled me to get a sense of the folder and its contents as artefact, and to familiarise and orientate myself, the second reading allowed me to consider how Literary Studies might be related to my former English teaching and current teaching of pedagogy for Literature. The third reading concentrated on the materiality of the archive, a focus driven by concerns emerging during the second reading.

I describe both accounts as fictions, as they are stories – discursive mash-ups of archival quotations, memory, text and context. I use the word 'pulp' for these intertexts, drawing on the word's meanings as: (1) the juicy part of any fruit; (2) 'material prepared by chemical or mechanical means from various materials (such as wood or rags) for use in making paper and cellulose products' (Merriam-Webster, 2023); and (3) worthless or cheap narrative, denoting the low cultural value ascribed to study notes and their inevitable destination in recycling or landfill. This archive contains the words of lecturers, tutors, poets, novelists, playwrights, critics, experts and peer students, along with my own. There is often no way of knowing whose words they are: my note-taking skills were evolving, and I had no system back then even for delineating my own ideas from those presented. These pulp fictions are not resurrections, but reconstitutions as something else entirely.

Pulp fiction one: The making of literature (and me)
From the introductory lecture, my meticulous notes suggest that Literary Studies addressed students as active participants in the making of literary meanings. Ian Reid's *The short story* was one of our set texts and his *The making of literature: Texts, contexts and classroom practices* had been published the year before in 1984. It seems likely lecturers had read the latter work and were enacting Reid's workshop rather than taking a distanced and passive approach to studying literature. In English, lectures were given by famous academics on their research areas, and tutorials were tense small groups in a circle in a tutor's office, unpacking and validating the lecturer's insights into the text.

The Literary Studies materials instead suggest creative input, and creative writing is even the focus of the first part of the course. It is hard to communicate today how radical this was. Creative writing as a degree was not studied at Prominent University. You could go to the technical college down the road if you wanted to major in such a utilitarian skill. There were very strict boundaries about what was 'academic' and what was not: this is even reflected in the introduction to

myself that I wrote in my first Literary Studies tutorial. It starts:

> My name is Lucinda McKnight and I'm commencing an Arts course this year, coming straight from HSC [Higher School Certificate]. My interests are varied and reflected in the subjects I'm taking this year. I love painting and life drawing … and although these cannot be taken as subjects here, I am keeping them up in my spare time.

I felt gauche, young and ignorant in my Arts degree, a barely 18-year-old upper working-/lower middle-class girl from a book-free home in an outer suburb, studying in inner, more cosmopolitan Melbourne. I was out of place and unworldly, yet school English had taught me I had something to say through creative practice, even if I was not well read or travelled. In fact, there *was* a creative writing elective in the university English course, for a very small number of students, led by an eminent White, male professor and poet, but although I applied to enrol, I was not accepted. Literary Studies took down these boundaries, at least to some extent.

We interacted with and created texts, rather than standing at a respectful distance from canonical literature and relying on lecturer wisdom. Each week involved writing short pieces to use as the basis of discussion and analysis, along with literary works; in the first week I wrote not only an introduction to myself but also a speculative 'Guide to Orientation Week' for students in the following year. When we studied Characterisation, we wrote character outlines then dialogues passed between us in the voices of our characters. When we studied Narrative, we planned and graphed stories of our own on timelines. We undertook in-depth studies into areas of interest and presented on them in class, learning from peers. My most cited academic article today relies on my Literary Studies presentation on Romanticism, although I did not realise this until re-reading this archive.

The materials show dense, embodied interaction with handouts and handwritten texts – scribblings, scratchings, scansion symbols, underlinings, doodlings, re-writings of literary works, lettering for rhyme schemes, addenda, reminders, recommendations, ideas. Other students wrote to me and into my writing. I remember these tutorials as being fun; some of what we wrote remains laugh-out-loud funny. English tutorials, in contrast, were a torment, with the tutor seated at his desk in his own office, asking questions that resulted in long silences and it was always a huge relief when they were over. I felt exposed in the small circle and I remember nothing else from those tutorials, nothing learned. My English tutorial notes are very brief. Literary Studies tutorials, in contrast, were in a classroom with a big table that we sat around, and worked around, together.

Literary Studies addressed us as writers interested in the workings of literature and capable of creating our own. English led us towards higher insights, as modelled by intellects superior to our own. In English, we wrote an essay on a poem for assessment. In Literary Studies, we wrote a poem for assessment in the style of a literary work, with an exegesis explaining how and why we departed from a stimulus poem's genre/style.

The choice of Literary Studies set texts similarly addressed us as practitioners of a craft. The working knowledge of metaphor I acquired has inspired and informed both my English teaching and my research work. 'Start with Abrams' is written in several places in my notes. *A glossary of literary terms* (Abrams, 1981) is and has been one of the most frequently used books on my bookshelf, consistently, over four decades. Literary Studies validated an eager unknowing and gave permission to find out and to delve, rather than expecting a performative knowing.

I want to be careful not to fetishise a structuralist approach to literature or the power conferred by literary metalanguage; these are not what has accrued from Literary Studies for me. Nor would I arrange what I learned around the current Australian National English Curriculum organisers of Language, Literature and Literacy. Instead, reading back through my notes, I would characterise Literary Studies as foregrounding becoming in three synergistic and overlapping dimensions: craft, curiosity and complexity. We were not positioned as knowing less than experts, but as rapidly acquiring the knowledge of experts and putting it to work.

In relation to craft, we were addressed as emergent practitioners: poets, writers, dramatists, authors, hands-on workers engaged in processes of creation. In relation to curiosity, we were addressed as researchers, seeking to delve behind great works of literature and understand them better, to read ever more, to develop and follow personal interests, to experiment and to learn. In relation to complexity, we were addressed as possessing the potential to become experts, to know the hard stuff, to know the detail and the contradictions and the confusions around a concept like 'Romanticism', to seek and embrace interdisciplinary knowledge.

If these three dimensions are imagined as a Venn diagram, I propose that my own literary educator capability, understood as an emergent confidence in my ability to teach any text, resides in the centre, where these dispositions overlap. I love to teach a new text, to encounter it, and play with it, and work out how it works, and what I do not know about it, and what I can find out, drawing on all the resources available.

This is an orientation to teaching Literature that many preservice (and practising) teachers seem to aspire to but are uncertain how to achieve. Instead they are pulled towards comprehension and getting answers 'right' according to what has been said before, so they can tell their English students accurate textual insights to reproduce in essays and exams (Yates, 2023, p. 160). Literary Studies addressed me as being in accumulation mode, rather than in deficit. This was pre-internet, when the reference books forming the start of a professional library were more significant as resources, and made some practices if not certain, then at least more likely. We were given access to knowledge withheld from many preservice teachers today – knowledge that was pleasurable and empowering to acquire. And we also studied challenging texts and authors including Robinson, Yeats, Shakespeare, Auden, Clare, Frost, Hardy, Hood, Keats, Marvell, Rossetti, Shelley, Malouf, Eliot, Arnold, Balzac, Zola, Spencer, Kipling, Brook, Defoe, Woolf, Richardson and Borges, learning that we had things to bring to these texts, even when they seemed impenetrable.

This first reading of the archival material was influenced by my desire to learn what might be useful to take forward into ITE – what helped me and what I have drawn on in English education, both consciously and unconsciously over the years. But as I was writing, any idealistic nostalgia dissipated. In hindsight, 1985 seems to have been a queasy moment in time, when the canonical and humanist certainties of the twentieth century endured, when modernism had clearly failed to go far enough, and when although postmodernism warranted a short paragraph in Abram's *A glossary of literary terms*, it had not really arrived yet in the English faculty at Prominent University. Nor had postcolonialism, despite the inclusion of Borges (Argentine, but with British, Spanish and Portuguese heritage, and from a settler-colonial family).

Any contemporary attention to diversity and voices in the archive, for example, would baulk at the list of texts and authors above; my own discomfort on encountering it informed the third reading. How did this text list therefore address me in 1985? The inclusion of Eagleton's *Introduction to literary theory* (1983), published just two years prior, as the focus of the last week is a telling detail. Perhaps the academics felt it must be included, but did not yet know what to do with it. In my notes for the second last tutorial, on 3/10/1985, I have drawn a donut diagram, like a giant lens, with divisions of the circle broken up into five sections: '*psycho, Marxist, de construct, struct, fem*'. '*NB*', I have written below: '*simplified: there are other angles*', but I would have struggled to suggest any.

For the final tutorial, we had to read the last chapter of Eagleton, from which race is conspicuously absent. He writes in this chapter: 'Departments of literature in higher education, then, are part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state' (Eagleton, 1983, p. 200). For White academics and students, analysing capitalism, feminism, culture (foreshadowing Cultural Studies) and class was enough – my notes contain no traces of dissent. While this taste of Eagleton equipped me well for what was to come, and I agree that literary theory is 'less an object of intellectual inquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times' (Eagleton, 1983, pp. 194–195), this demands today that I consider what the perspective offered by Literary Studies might have been, in a settler-colonial country.

Pulp fiction two: The making of literature (and nation)

It is what is missing that drives the second pulp-fictive account of this archive. As Ellsworth (1997) says, the structure of any pedagogical address has a third dimension: what is missing (p. 63). She advocates multiple readings that each remain open to further readings. In this second account (based on my third reading of the archive), I have tried to read against the grain (Araluen Corr, 2018; Brodkey, 1996; Mitchell & Weaver, 1999; Stoler, as cited in Stanley, 2016;), to ask again who these documents think I am. 'Grain', in this instance, alerts me to read with attention to fibre and the materiality of paper, the substance of the archive, instead of its discursive contents.

Initially, however, thinking merely about what is missing, these documents address me as a person who will not question the absences of women, gender-diverse and racially diverse peoples on the text list, as a person with no expectation that they should be there, and as complicit in their elision (or happy enough with a token inclusion of Rossetti and Woolf). Yet this does not go far enough, as it merely applies critical literacy's

routine question about who is missing to the text list. Race is mentioned only once in my notes. At the bottom of one page I have written the following, with a scribbled asterisk: '*Class, Gender, Race, Nation – 4 component parts of ideology*'.

Yet race is missing from the donut diagram described above. The course is structured, and the mode of address is structured, around an absence of reflexivity about race that naturalises this for me, and perhaps for others like me with Anglo or European heritage. How might this make events in the present possible – for example, Black reviewers commenting on what should be obvious mistakes and assumptions in my submitted journal articles? Perhaps even what is presented in Pulp Fiction One as a successful Literary education is inadequate preparation for critical self-reflection as a White teacher and scholar. And others educated at this time, like me, are now in their fifties, Heads of English faculties at schools and English method unit chairs in universities. We have the power to effect change, but perhaps not the initial university education to inform it.

The Literary Studies/English education nexus, in this example, reinforces the colonial project of sustained pretence: that White Australians were/are not living, studying and teaching on stolen land. All the metalinguistic proficiency, the challenging texts and hands-on creativity of Literary Studies served to distract from calls for justice – to function as canonical noise that would silence truth-telling. Natalie Harkin (2020) writes of the violence of archives. In this instance, the smugness of disciplinarity, the pleasures of literary and teacherly dexterity and the arrogance of canonical familiarity superseded, in Pulp Fiction One, what this archive might also have to say. With no remembered cognitive dissonance, in 1985 I was also playing Goanna's 1982 smash hit song 'Solid Rock', attacking the European invasion of Australia, in my car's radio cassette player.

To think of racial justice in Australia is to think of land, or Country. This is not to reduce First Nations peoples to being 'only' part of the land, although such a hierarchical concept is a White Western/Northern fiction in itself, denigrating 'land'. The 'elevation' of First Nations Australians from the category of flora and fauna to being counted in the census took place in 1971, only 13 years before I undertook Literary Studies. What does this archive suggest about violence, and the micro-violences of my future White teaching and academic practices?

Through a radical reimagining of the archive and a desire to move beyond merely noting failures in representation (McKnight, 2018), I offer here a different account. Thinking with Araluen Corr and Harkin, and with posthumanist and new materialist theory, this is a story of the archive, expressing itself materially, through chemical reactions, through remainders and reminders of processes, through remnants of its origins. Thinking with fibre, this is not only about what should have been woven through – that is, the First Nations human stories that are missing. I am not in a position to tell these stories. Instead, this account argues that both Literary Studies 1985 and English education are predicated on paper, and therefore on the paper industry. The paper industry is predicated on stealing Country for forestry, for felling and clearing. In Australia, this cannot be separated from the broader genocidal practices of the colonists.

My folder smells of wood. Paper's raw material is wood pulp; it is made from wood fibres soaked in liquid, drained on a wire screen and dried under pressure and heat (ACT Government, 2018). Literary Studies, subject English and English method are written on the bodies of trees. Their culpability is entangled with that of the industries of forestry, paper, stationery and publishing, and the environmental impacts of their axes, glues and inks, on Country that has never been ceded. This telling asserts that the materiality of the archive is not inert, passive or neutral (Bennett, 2010). It cannot be dismissed or ignored as a mere vehicle for discourse. In the flattening effect of new materialism, paper becomes as important as words in relation to the archive, the countless paper artefacts of my teaching and academic careers, and this recycled paper on which I am writing this draft, in my notebook.

The red cardboard of the Literary Studies folder, the blue ink, the graphite, the plastic reinforcements down the edges of the loose, punched pages do not speak in ways that are readily understood, yet their endurance, physicality and presence insist that they matter. Harkin (2020) tears and weaves trips of copied archival material into baskets to hear them speak. This culturally specific, Arts-based translation takes ownership of family voices from government archives and honours struggles for justice. Harkin (2020) advises researchers to turn to their own cultural practices for methodological inspiration, and here I use research and writing to craft a discursive 'paper' or article, using academic 'papermaking' to find out what the archive might say if it could address

me in ways other than through text.

To tell a story that might be told by this artefact is to be able to understand how it addresses us, and indeed how it addressed me in 1985, though I did not know how to be attentive then. For that I have needed to shift out of the safe, discursive comfort zone of Literary Studies, English, English teaching and English method as I have experienced them. I need, and need readers to be prepared to, put aside interdisciplinary knowledges that may conveniently seem unimportant or irrelevant, and to countenance a second, vastly different pulp, or useful combination of knowledge scraps that might form the basis of something new.

The archive might tell me that in Australia the vast postwar expansion of the paper industry involved the destruction of native hardwoods and that this was construed as 'progress' (Donath, 1957). In the 1980s, when I wrote my Literary Studies essays, the greatest losses were in eucalypt forests. In the 1990s, when I was photocopying class sets of poems, the monocultures of pine plantations were threatening biodiversity. By 1992 more than 80 per cent of eucalypt forests had been modified by postcolonial intervention. By 2012, while I was printing out lengthy drafts of my PhD on teaching English, Australia had lost 40 per cent of its forests, with those remaining highly fragmented and threatened. It might tell me that deforestation releases greenhouse gases, and reforestation is the only hope to redress this (Bradshaw, 2012).

It might tell me of the black liquor, the effluent that paper mills must dispose of, and the harm it does to the environment, of the scarring of forests, the salinity of soils and the scarcity of mature eucalypts and their rich ecosystems (Algar, 1988/2020). It might describe the triumphant colonial titles of staff at the paper mills: the Engineer for the Use of Eucalypts for Making Pulp; the Chief Land Purchasing Officer; the Timber Procurement Officer (Australian Paper Manufacturers Ltd, 2023).

It might tell me, or show me through paper cuts as I handle the pages, how timber fights back – how it blunted chipper knives, carried fire from tree to tree to burn forests rather than have them felled, grew with other species to complicate processing and produced noxious effluent, that black liquor. The industry complained of 'the more troublesome behaviour of [the trees'] black liquor, particularly from older trees, during evaporation and combustion in the chemical recovery process' (Algar, 1988/2020). It might speak with the speculative voice of its future, the powerful,

chemical voice of the methane it will exude from landfill, denying the inertia of matter. It might allude to the violent history of the 'dangers of the paper trade' (Steedman, 2001, p. 23), including those threatening historians who breathe in the toxic dust of archives.

It might tell the stories of the people who have lived and interacted with these trees and their ancestors for thousands of years and managed not to threaten to eradicate them, or, in one example, the Dja Dja Wurrung people still in negotiation over their mountain ash forests today. I do not have authority to tell these stories, but they are told elsewhere, in multiple accounts of different Country (see for example Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, 2021).

If I could hear the archival voices of paper from other places, they might tell me that Australia exported knowledge of eucalypt exploitation to countries of the Global South like Indonesia and Brazil, so that their ancestral forests might also be replaced by paper-feeding monocultures that endanger livelihoods and whole societies. That many native forests, as sources of food, medicine, spirituality and community, have been and are being lost (LifeMosaic, 2023) due to the same knowledges and practices that made Literary Studies and this archive. The imported set texts, printed in the USA, the UK and Japan, could tell their own stories of environmental shame.

Discussion

If Literary Studies and English educators were less preoccupied with what is printed on paper, instead of literature as paper and as stolen and/or damaged Country, social and planetary justice might be more readily sought. This would require a further radical reorientation, in Australia, to First Nations ways of knowing and being with Country, and to 'literature' as orality, too (Yunkaporta, 2019). White Australian 'experts' and students would need to relinquish resistant notions of expertise, and embrace unknowing, dissolving disciplinary boundaries and trying instead to countenance multispecies stories. Already, above, I have made shaky forays into Forestry, Biology and Ecology, inevitably flawed and reliant on academic literatures that are new to me.

A different model might be imagined here, that would reimagine or expand the three circles of craft, curiosity and complexity suggested above. 'Craft' would address the contextually located activist, the expert crafter making sustainable paper or writing implements, the designer of posthuman, diverse

literature-informed futures, the mapper of discursive-material entanglements, the expert analyst of colonial fictions. 'Curiosity' would address the student as interested in history, geography and Country through literature, as expected to leap disciplinary boundaries, as a voracious reader of stories that challenge received wisdom, as in dialogue with First Nations experts and the stories emerging from Country before and since colonisation, as an experimenter and researcher. 'Complexity' would address the difficulties of attending to silences, of acknowledging materiality, of breaking down nature-culture and material-discursive binaries and of bringing transdisciplinary knowledge to bear in answering challenging questions. At the centre of this model is a new literary educator capability that is constantly evolving into what is needed for justice imperatives, for example, postcolonial truth-telling, treaty-making and re-wilding.

Revisiting the two pulp fictions

The first pulp fiction above gives a sense of some affordances that have flowed from choices made in Prominent University's 1985 Literary Studies course, in contrast to the traditional English tertiary subjects, for me as both English teacher and academic. This is achieved through a breaking-down of boundaries, in a pre-postmodern moment in which the literary critic greats of modernism were still revered but Eagleton arrived as an afterthought, in the final week's lecture and tutorial. The second fiction troubles the first, with a radical reimagining of what the archive is. It provides, in effect, a counterclaim, that the first fiction cements the lies told in both Literary Studies and English that materiality, and Country, do not matter. To print course handbooks, to open textbooks and to stack paper in the photocopier is to handle trees, land, water and sky. It is to handle the future, and the past within the future. This small archival project has required me to think about what Literary Studies naturalised for me, and who and what it invited me to be. Or who and what it invited me to ignore.

Further research could examine how my Literary Studies course, in 1985, came to be – what institutional dialogues, conflicts, resolutions and initiatives birthed and conscribed it. Or it could explore more rigorously exactly where, Country-wise, the paper I wrote on came from, and whose Country that was and is, and what the stories of that Country and those Traditional Owners are. How ironic that I should know so much about Eliot's *The wasteland*, a notoriously difficult poem, and

so little about the paper on which I wrote about it, and the wasteland the paper industry has made of Country! I do not know to whom I should apologise or pay reparations. How wrong to think the hard questions were about Borges, or 'synecdoche', when the really hard questions are about what those literary questions obscure. A mapping of the full apparatus of the archive and of Literary Studies – of everything that produced these phenomena – is urgently needed. Yet given what is hidden, and forgotten and pulped, such a feat may not even be possible. It could be attempted though.

Literary Studies, school English and English education, in my history, have served to reinforce each other as discursive domains largely silent about materiality and colonialism. Working across sectors, this could be acknowledged. A literature of novels, poems and plays is a literature of trees, of carbon, oxygen and nitrogen taken up as integral to nonhuman bodies in located yet unnamed Country that belongs to First Nations Australians. Evelyn Araluen Corr (2018, p. 489) argues that in making the archive perceivable, it must also become responsible. How can Literary Studies and English work together to assume this responsibility, if this has resonance for others? How can educators address 'patterns of erasure' (Harkin, 2020, p. 10) and find ways to live productively and honestly with the past? Simply expanding text lists to include First Nations voices is just one small part of what can be done. More fundamentally, White academics and teachers need to acknowledge the convenient colonist fictions that the Literary Studies/English disciplinary nexus maintains and perpetuates.

Given the threat to trees both nationally and globally, a green and brown Literary Studies/English is urgently needed. This subject would be taught face-to-face, sustainably, perhaps even on Country in precious remaining forests, with permission from local Elders. It could be designed collaboratively with Elders. Perhaps it could also be digitally offered, with carbon offsets. This would be a core subject, not an ecocritical elective or isolated study of a text with green credentials. In this discipline, students would make and write on their own notepaper, creating pulp from recycled scraps, fabrics and fallen petals and leaves, gathered sustainably from Country and with guidance from traditional custodians. They would cherish second-hand books and the marginalia of previous students, and enjoy working across editions, reducing landfill and methane. They would research and reflect on the environmental impact of reading literature online,

of server farms and computer waste. This would be a Literary Studies that addresses all together and yet acknowledges that all are not the same (Braidotti, 2019). This vital, reimagined discipline might go some way towards engaging and retaining more students and potential teachers in the English education pipeline crisis that has been described in the academic literature (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2020).

Conclusion: The jester's cap

The small, community-located archive that represents Literary Studies and forms the basis of this study is made of ordinary materials: cardboard, ink and now-obsolete foolscap paper. Once foolscap paper had a barely visible watermark of a jester's cap and bells, providing its name ('fool's cap') long after the watermark was discontinued. The joke is on (White) humans if the planet can no longer sustain human life after the mass loss of biodiversity, the raising of temperatures and the rising of seas. Imagining a radically different Literary Studies and subject English nexus is a large project.

However, if this article means that even one of the countless similar archival folders, in cupboards and boxes under the stairs, attics and garages, filing cabinets and boxes, is recycled rather than going to landfill, then it has had an impact by reducing greenhouse gases. Ahead of me, or my own offspring after I am gone and they are sorting through the archive of my life, is the long task of stripping the soft plastic reinforcing strips from thousands of foolscap pages in all my university folders so that they can be pulped and remade. Taking action can be hard work in all sorts of ways, and the orientations of craft, curiosity and complexity reinforce this.

Literary Studies and English education in Australia emerge from this small archival study as being as much about stolen Country as they are about great works of literature, because they *are* stolen Country. Acknowledging this is more than recuperative work for White educators and the making of excuses for history. It foregrounds the enduring materiality of Literary Studies, and the political, historical and geographical economies of what makes a subject possible. It breaks apart the extraordinary educational fiction that books and papers come from nowhere and go nowhere. And it opens the boundaries of Literary Studies and English up to unexpected stories that might create a more just world.

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Conceptualising Intersubjective Interpretations from Ethical Criticism and Student Responses to Ethically Oriented Literature Pedagogies: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract: Despite an ethical turn in both literary studies and secondary-level literature education since the 1980s, scholars of ethical criticism and classroom research on ethically oriented literature pedagogies have rarely engaged in colligation. In this integrative literature review, I call for clearer conceptualisations of intersubjective forms of ethical meaning-making to help address the practical concerns of self-oriented student responses in ethically oriented literature classrooms. First, I highlight ethical criticism's lack of attention to intersubjective interpretations of texts, despite Wayne Booth's (1988, 1998) theorising of coduction and practical suggestions for teaching literature ethically, and connect these with recent pedagogical research. I then draw on two pedagogical approaches of embodied ethical encounters in literature classrooms – Peter Rabinowitz's (2010) lateral ethics and Suzanne Choo's (2021) listening and bridge-building routines – as a framework to conceptualise how teachers can account for resistant and self-oriented student responses, and facilitate receptive and other-oriented ones.

Keywords: Literature education, ethical criticism, student responses, intersubjective interpretation, integrative literature review

Introduction

This article aims to provide an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005) that not only identifies gaps in the scholarship of ethical criticism in literary studies with regard to intersubjective meaning-making, but also to draw key pedagogical considerations and recommendations from scholars of ethical criticism as a framework with which to conceptualise key findings from empirical research on ethically oriented secondary-level literature pedagogies. I specifically include studies that report classroom interactions and student responses drawn from verbal dialogic meaning-making processes – especially where students deliberate on how literary representations of otherness are constructed, situated and interpreted, be it in their local and/or global contexts. Suzanne Choo (2021) observes that even though there has been an ethical turn in literary studies since the 1980s, popularised by scholars such as Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum, it has mostly been conceptualised by scholars working in tertiary settings rather than at secondary school level, resulting in a distinct lack of attention to the application of ethical criticism in the teaching of literature. Furthermore, most scholarly texts in this field focus on identifying literary texts and the ways in which their form and content invite or provoke ethical responses. This framing of the transaction between reader and text assumes that it occurs in a reader's subjective private space, rather than in the intersubjective public space of the classroom while interacting with a community of other readers who are being socialised into an interpretive practice of

literary texts directed by their prevailing curriculum and teachers' pedagogies and forms of assessment (Choo, 2021).

At the secondary level, there have been multiple prominent and complementary forms of ethically oriented literature pedagogies conceptualised and advocated for by educators in which students are positioned as active meaning-makers of texts. More importantly, such approaches in Anglophone classrooms encourage students to be sensitive to varying foci of (in) justice and inclusivity, and cultivate a commitment to understanding others who have different beliefs and/ or experience suffering, inequality and discrimination. They range from multicultural literature (Boyd, 2002; Dressel, 2005; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019a; Glazier & Seo, 2005; Louie, 2005; Thein & Sloan, 2012; Yandell, 2008) to critical literacy (Gutierrez, 2014; Luke, 2000), critical pedagogy pertaining to racial inequality (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Dyches & Thomas, 2020) and social justice pedagogy (Brauer, 2018; Dover, 2013) including trauma literature (Jones & College, 2021; Moore & Begoray, 2017), to name but a few. With critical and ethical objectives, these pedagogies are often enacted through classroom dialogue that collaboratively elicits student perspectives in order to develop informed interpretations of literary texts and engage with ethical issues within and across local, national and transnational communities.

Practical concerns of ethical conversations in literature classrooms: Addressing self-oriented student responses

Classroom studies that examine student responses to such ethically oriented pedagogies in Anglophone settings have raised multiple forms of in-situ tensions, especially around managing students' self-oriented responses when discussing literary representations of difference and otherness. At one end of the spectrum, students from dominant groups who present objectifying stances towards the 'other' tend to express these forms of resistance when their majority or privileged positionalities are challenged in class. One common response is for such students to express discomfort and resentment towards teacher or peer worldviews that contradict or challenge their prevailing, limited beliefs about those who are different. In a predominantly White American Grade 11 class, for example, several White students openly expressed their disdain towards their teacher's antiracist approach to reading *Huckleberry Finn*, treating it as a form of

'complaining' and 'an attempt to "reshape" [their] identity and thinking' (Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 47). Other White students subtly resisted the antiracist approach by arguing that the class should 'just read the book' (p. 46). Another resistant response involved expressing dismissive and presumptuous perspectives on the representation of difference and otherness. A majority-race student with an imposing presence in a multicultural Year 10 East London school classroom, for example, assertively used racial categories to determine others' identities (Yandell, 2008), rejecting his peers' conception of mixed-race identities. In a predominantly White middle- to upper-class American school, Year 9 students subtly resisted an antiracist approach to *To kill a mockingbird* via their usage of the pronouns 'we' and 'they', demonstrating an assumption 'that all members of the classroom share[d] a dominant, White perspective, thereby contributing to the normalcy and neutrality of a dominant White perspective' (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 418).

Furthermore, while some students may consciously present receptive stances toward those who suffer from injustice, their 'transactional' encounters with the text in their personal responses (Rosenblatt, 1994) can result in them remaining within their own limited frames of reference as they speak about the other. For instance, in Ginsberg and Glenn's (2019b) study, although a class of urban high school students (mostly of colour) noticeably made progress in learning about Muslims and Islam, they still judged the choices and cultural practices of characters in Muslim Young Adult literature out of frustration based on 'ethnocentric assumptions' (p. 611) and 'deficit constructions' (p. 612) that saw Muslim cultures as lacking in comparison to American culture – 'not necessarily in line with the way "we" do things' (p. 613). Even while they began to express empathetic concerns for Muslim characters, students continued to reflect 'a persistent desire to oversimplify categorisation' and 'possessed constructions of Muslims grounded in assumptions of violence' (p. 615). Elsewhere, American high school students read a translated Chinese novella about an innocent artist's suffering and endurance during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Louie, 2005). While students could demonstrate cognitive and historical empathy, with the help of a three-week contextual knowledge in the first part of the unit, many still condemned the protagonist's actions using the conservative moral and religious norms of their own worlds, especially with regards to abortion (Louie,

2005). The students also expressed more reactive emotional empathy towards the protagonist's dog when it was killed than they did to other characters such as the protagonist, who as a political victim was made to endure torture and the forced abortion of his son. These receptive yet self-oriented responses can have the inadvertent effect of reinforcing a sense of cultural superiority by avoiding the examination of injustice.

Nonetheless, these forms of student self-orientation and resistance should not be taken as a reason for a teacher to retreat, but rather as evidence that students are engaged in an integral process of learning that 'produces dissonance between their socialization and antiracist possibilities' (Dyches & Thomas, 2020, p. 49). In this constructive spirit, this review is guided by the following question: how can pedagogical considerations from scholars in the field of ethical criticism be synthesised with classroom research on student responses to ethically oriented pedagogies in literature classrooms in order to address teachers' in-situ concerns about managing students' self-oriented responses to the other?

Theoretical conceptions of text and reader relations in ethical criticism

At this juncture, I propose to connect the field of ethical criticism in literary studies with existing research on classroom interactions within ethically oriented pedagogies of teaching literature. As a field, ethical criticism 'does not refer to a school or critical approach, but rather to an upsurge of interest in the relationship between ethics, literature, criticism' (Eaglestone, 2011, p. 581) in which critics prioritise ethical reasoning and inquiry (Davis & Womack, 2001). However, in Anglophone contexts, the lack of a common systematic methodology (Gregory, 1998) for ethical criticism means that it rarely features as a theoretical lens for study done at the tertiary level by undergraduate students, partly owing to the disparate strands in the field. Thus far, three distinct strands of ethical criticism have conceptualised the subjective and interpretive relationship between the text and the private reader, with varying theoretical recognition of intersubjective responses in public spaces, which are most pertinent to the ethically oriented literature classroom.

In Anglophone scholarship, Eaglestone (2011) observes two 'wings' of ethical criticism (p. 586). The first concerns scholars such as Wayne Booth (1988, 1998) and Martha Nussbaum (1990), who '[work] on issues of judgment and morality … often focusing on questions of narrative' (Eaglestone, 2011, p. 582). This strand draws from Aristotelian traditions and posits a text-to-self relation, in which readers identify with characters (mostly in fiction) and this imaginative role-playing exercise allows them to take on other people's perspectives, which in turn makes them more empathetic to others in society. Nussbaum (1997) has demonstrated how such a practice of cultivating readers' narrative imaginations – and in turn, their civic engagement in democratic societies – can be observed across courses in the liberal arts and humanities in various Western tertiary institutions. However, sustained attention has not been given to actual college students' responses in classroom discourse.

The second strand takes a text-to-other relation, drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy, which priorities the self's responsibility to the other. Derek Attridge (2015) is a leading critic in this vein, emphasising the need for a 'responsible reading' of the other – that is, the need to demonstrate 'a capacity to be hospitably open to the otherness of the work and to be ready to be changed by what it has to offer' (p. 206). In response to today's world of global risks, divisive ideologies and entrenched inequities, Suzanne Choo (2021) draws on Levinasian ethical criticism and the field of ethical cosmopolitanism to claim for literature education – mostly at secondary school level – a concern with how individuals can learn to relate with others in the world (p. 77).

Separately, a third approach that seeks an objective interpretation of ethical meaning in literary texts has emerged in Chinese academia since the mid-2000s. Called Ethical Literary Criticism, it is led by the Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao. Reacting against the lack of a clear methodology in ethical criticism (Tian, 2019), Nie (2014, 2015) crafts a text-to-values relation for the reader, using a systematic theoretical framework to historicise and interpret literary texts as cultural artefacts in order to engage in moral deliberation and rational inquiry into ethical values for the moral instruction of the individual. Since its inception, a multitude of Chinese, European and American scholars have applied Nie's framework to the study of a vast range of texts, which has generated volumes of scholarship (Tian & Duan, 2021). However, despite its purported emphasis on interpreting textual values for readers' moral instruction, this approach has not yet been practiced widely in secondary school literature pedagogy.

Coduction, text selection and interpretive stances: Connecting Wayne Booth and recent scholarship in literature education

Apart from Choo's (2021) formulation of cosmopolitan literature pedagogy, none of these strands has fully attended to the intersubjective practice of ethical meaning-making between real readers. Here, I return to Wayne Booth's (1988) term 'coduction', via which he theorised that the practice of collaborative meaning-making between real readers could help alleviate biases in individual readings of texts. Using this neologism created from *co* ('together') and *ducere* ('to lead, draw out, bring, bring out'), Booth (1988) explains that an individual's tentative interpretations, coupled with a careful regard for and openness to other readers' conflicting and/or varying perspectives, is generative for ethical meaning-making:

> When [coduction] is performed with a genuine respect both for one's own intuitions and for what other people have to say, it is surely a more reasonable process than any deduction of quality from general ethical principles could be. (p. 76)

Booth (1988) exemplifies the practice of coduction by unravelling his changing perspectives on *Huckleberry Finn*, 'from untroubled admiration to restless questioning' (pp. 477–478) following the unforeseen provocation of his late colleague Paul Moses. As the one Black faculty member speaking up about academic reading lists, Moses challenged Mark Twain's problematic White liberal portrayal of slavery's consequences, the engagement of liberated slaves and the expected behaviour of slaves towards Whites, much to the unease of his White colleagues (Booth, 1988, p. 3).

Not only are elements of conversation and dialogue shown to be fundamental in the practice of coduction through this example, Booth (1988) also proposes that they be enacted with multiple, reliable interlocutors, as 'the validity of our coductions must always be corrected in conversations about the coductions of others whom we trust' (p. 73). Even though this clearly signals and invites a dialogic practice between teachers and students in the literature classroom across all levels, however, Booth's coduction approach has not been taken up by educators in classroom contexts in order to conceptualise the dispositions and practices that facilitate the intersubjective practice of ethical meaning-making, apart from Sheridan Blau's (2003) acknowledgement of Booth in his conception of the Literature Workshop (p. 54).

At the same time, Booth's own pedagogical reflections on the ethics of teaching literature do little to attend to the intersubjective activity between students and teachers in classrooms. In his 1998 paper 'The ethics of teaching literature', published in *College English*, he reflected on the 'widespread neglect' of 'how to *teach* ethical reading and writing' (p. 43, original italics) to students, citing a dearth of scholarly attention to teaching or pedagogy in a conference on literature and ethics and his own oversight in his monograph on ethical criticism, in which the anecdote about Paul Moses is the only mention of teaching in its 500-page entirety. To address this discrepancy, Booth (1998) asserts the value of teaching ethical criticism as being that it 'teaches effective casuistry: the counterbalancing of "cases"' (p. 48). In short, students can reason and resolve ethical dilemmas and inconsistencies within and across literary texts as 'virtual cases' that will 'echo the cases [they] will meet when [they] return to the more disorderly, "actual" world' (Booth, 1998, p. 48).

There are two main considerations to be gleaned from Booth's (1998) six practical suggestions, which already speak to studies of ethically oriented literature classrooms. First, he highlights the need for teachers to select texts and frame their lines of questioning to provoke students and alert them to both opposing values between texts and implied internal inconsistencies within texts (Booth, 1998, pp. 50–51). Teachers can introduce at least one text which they consider ethically flawed and that their students will find 'repugnant' (Booth, 1998, p. 50) before including a rival text that introduces value-conflict by revealing the first text's 'dangers and stupidities' (p. 51). Thereafter, they can select texts in which the implied author rejects the values supported by appealing characters and sympathetic narrators, as well as identifying within texts the signs of the implied author's 'unintentional incoherence or inadvertent revelation of flaws' (Booth, 1998, p. 51).

Where Booth's recommendations focus on pairing texts with contrasting values to illuminate ethical blind spots, Australian educators currently favour a focus on diversifying literary text selections in schools beyond canonical White authors (Little & Aglinskas, 2022; Truman, 2019), especially in terms of introducing Asian voices (Curwood & Gauci, 2020; Thomas & To, 2019), Aboriginal perspectives (Bacalja & Bliss, 2019; Scarcella & Burgess, 2019; Worrell, 2022), Australian literature (Davies et al., 2017) and LGBTQ+ representation (McGraw & van Leent, 2018; McRae &

Curwood, 2018). Such a plurivocal approach addresses the pedagogical concern of combating Australian insularity and apathy to foreign and marginal cultures by exposing students to difference in the classroom. Ultimately, Booth's dialectical approach to text selection remains complementary and may occasionally overlap with Australian educators' dialogic approaches of introducing multiple perspectives across texts.

Secondly, Booth (1998) advises teachers to use instructional strategies that toggle between immersive and critical modes. Students need to participate in 'fully engaged reading – of understanding what the story itself is up to' on the one hand, while also being able to step back and practise 'critical oversight, of the overstanding that results when we apply to a story values alien to it' (Booth, 1998, p. 52). This balance ensures that students reflexively consider the relevance of their own worldviews and experiences as they transact ethical meanings with the literary text. In turn, teachers can identify a spectrum and balance of aesthetic and empathetic responses. Brett's (2016) Authorial Empathy Semantic Differential Scale can help raise both students' and teachers' metacognitive reflections on balancing technique-driven and ethically oriented responses to literary texts in class discussions. In studying small-group discussions of Mark Doty's poem 'Charlie Howard's descent', for example, Brett (2016) noticed that successful conversations paired up discussion strategies that favoured ambiguity and tentative language. In one group, a student's momentary insertion of herself into the text 'spurred the students to more empathetic responses and heralded a contextualizing strategy' (Brett, 2016, p. 300) while another group combined strategies including 'noticing author's craft', 'searching for meaning' and 'stating confusion' (p. 299) that preserved openness in their collaborative dialogue.

Mapping pedagogical reflections from ethical criticism to classroom interactions

Booth (1998) does return to the idea of coduction to consider the most important methodological problem in the ethics of teaching literature: 'how to build habits of genuine conversation, thoughtful talk by students who have learned to practice penetrating criticism of one another's readings – and of the teacher's own biases' (p. 52). He proposes that a common school-wide literary text be assigned for study, to make the conditions for spontaneous conversation and coduction – where students can easily continue ethical

interpretations outside of the classroom purview – are possible. However, his practical suggestion remains inapplicable for most schools and teachers, and the complexity of such exchanges remain undertheorised.

In the remainder of this article, I turn to the pedagogical reflections of two scholar-educators in the field of ethical criticism – Peter Rabinowitz (2010) and Suzanne Choo (2021) – who have outlined pedagogical considerations and approaches that attend to students' classroom interactions in ethically oriented secondary- and tertiary-level literature classrooms. On their own, each gestures towards intersubjective practices of ethical criticism in classrooms, focusing on key considerations and recommendations for how students and teachers can open or close possibilities of ethical meaning-making. I synthesise their work with studies of student responses, highlighting significant trends and connections between conceptual and empirical findings to help educators address students' self-oriented and resistant responses to the other and encourage other-oriented and receptive ones.

I selected 20 empirical studies published in peer-reviewed English-language international journals between 2000 and 2020, primarily written by scholars and educators from the USA and the UK. Many of these studies adopted multicultural approaches to teaching literature. However, despite prominent advocacy for ethically oriented text selections and pedagogies, there remains a paucity of research on classroom discourse in Australian and non-Western secondary school classrooms involving ethically oriented literature pedagogies.

Peter Rabinowitz's lateral ethics

In his article 'On teaching *The story of O*: Lateral ethics and the conditions of reading', Peter Rabinowitz (2010) conceptualises the notion of 'lateral ethics' to account for potential student resistance when teaching an ethically problematic text. Inspired by his personal and professional reflections on his conscious refusal to teach Pauline Réage's pornographic classic *The story of O* in an undergraduate course, Rabinowitz (2010) contends that in literature classrooms 'reading has a *lateral* dimension that involves groups of people in particular situations, groups with which we have ethical relations that are only secondarily connected to the ethics of the author-text-reader relationship' (p. 159, original italics). This proposition is grounded in two premises: that ethics concerns the acts and relations between people in a specific context, and that

literary reading is a social activity (Rabinowitz, 2010).

The complex task of mediating in-situ classroom dynamics is what informs Rabinowitz's (2010) decision to teach a text, rather than pragmatism, historical importance, literary and aesthetic quality, moral anxiety or personal taste. Unlike critics who assert that a focus on ethical responses is didactic and moralising to readers and students (Gearon, 2019; Posner, 1997), Rabinowitz concurs with other ethical critics – primarily Gregory (1998) – that we cannot separate ethical and aesthetic responses. For Rabinowitz, where pedagogical and ethical considerations abound, the ethics of teaching literature are inevitably socially specific.

Pedagogical consideration 1: Justifying the ethics of text selection

To begin with, Rabinowitz (2010) asks 'what's the ethics of *requiring* someone to read the text?' (p. 163). The very act of assigning a text to students indicates a teacher's value judgement, conveying an implicit belief that there will be useful takeaways from reading it. However, should students challenge this implicit value, not only does the teacher 'have an ethical obligation to justify the negative experience' and line of inquiry, the ensuing negotiation will need account for the lateral relationship between teacher, student, and institutions they represent (Rabinowitz, 2010). This both applies to text selection and can also extend to in-situ instructional choices about ethical meaning-making in dialogue.

How teachers can address students' open challenge of ethical disclaimers: In Mohamud's (2020) study, students in a British multicultural Year 9 classroom experienced considerable discomfort when an outspoken Somali student contested their non-Black Arab teacher's disclaimer regarding reading the n-word aloud when reading the novel *Of mice and men* by John Steinback. The student maintained that only the two Black students in the class, herself included, should get to decide. Mohamud (2020) identifies a missed opportunity in this heated debate for the class to discuss the appropriateness of ethical disclaimers more openly: for the student, 'the key issue was the racialised identity of the speaker' whereas for the teacher 'it was the context of the text' (p. 385). Ultimately, the 'collective sigh of relief' that followed the teacher's recognition of the student's distress showed how precariously crucial it is to acknowledge the validity behind students' open challenges of teachers' decisions around framing

ethical discussions. Without the teacher's willingness to question her own decision and her 'recognition that by reading the words she could have caused real offence' (Mahmoud, 2020, p. 386), a dismissal of student discomfort would have served to marginalise students' agency in engaging dialogue about how the language of discrimination is used in the classroom.

Pedagogical consideration 2: Understanding how sociocultural factors of classroom demographics and dynamics affect ethical meaning-making

Rabinowitz's (2010) second question concerns 'what's the ethical effect of requiring my students to read the novel *in this particular group*?' (p. 163). Having said that, his hypothesis of the 'potential costs' in creating scenarios that inadvertently privilege some students and induce anxiety in others – even after accounting for many factors, including how students' personal identities and cultural backgrounds influence their approaches to the chosen texts – needs to be taken into account. Ultimately, the criteria for including a text depend on whether the lateral ethics of any given class will be productive or otherwise – that is, whether 'an environment where students can be honest and open as they discuss serious and controversial issues' can be cultivated or not (Rabinowitz, 2010, p. 164). Several empirical studies highlight the need to account for such explicit and implicit sociocultural dynamics in any given classroom when facilitating student engagement in ethically oriented literature pedagogies. In other words, in creating a shared reading space, teachers need to be cognisant of sociocultural factors that can either inhibit or facilitate students' ethical meaning-making responses in three ways:

How students dynamically alter their responses to satisfy implicit norms of acceptable discourse and negotiate their self-identity with peers: Students have been shown to be preoccupied with adapting their in-class responses to negotiate both their teachers' expectations and what Rabinowitz (2010) calls their 'lateral relationship to the other students in the class' (p. 164). For example, Bedford (2015) observed how students in a multicultural British classroom were openly concerned about the acceptability and appropriateness of their written responses when it came to acknowledging and examining offensive stereotypes – even if those were related to their own cultures. Similarly, Shah (2013) observed that her students from diverse backgrounds hedged and mediated their responses in accordance with the presumed values they attributed to their

Muslim teacher (herself) when reading about sexual politics in the novel *The scarlet letter*. Furthermore, Boyd (2002) surmised that one above-average student's limited responses could be attributed not only to how she had been 'taught to get the right answer', but also how her 'good-student status' and privileged background inhibited her from questioning the institutionalised racism in the text or taking 'risks to say or write anything that might raise controversy' (p. 236).

Other studies have observed the interplay between the sociocultural reality of the teacher's classroom expectations and students' socialisation with peers. Thein et al. (2015) concur that students' perceptions of what is acceptable to and valued by their teachers in their whole-class discussions can lead them to revise and amend their responses in order to adhere to these interpretations, be they ones regarding rationality and politically correct or distanced academic registers, or even empathetic and social-justice oriented stances (pp. 210–212). For instance, when students turned to small-group discussions away from teacher monitoring, one student layered her academic register with a 'street-smart register' to position herself as both a teenager speaking alongside her peers, but also portray herself as a 'serious, intellectual person' (Thein et al., 2015, p. 215) capable of performing literary analysis.

Furthermore, studies also show that texts that contain ethical invitations are insufficient to foster critical engagement and understanding of others on their own, even if students share similar cultural or demographic traits with featured characters (Glazier & Seo, 2005; Thein et al., 2011). In Thein et al.'s 2011 study, students reading *Bastard out of California* collaboratively interpreted characters in ways that reinforced rather than challenged common assumptions and myths about social class in the USA, instead of adopting what many critics believe to be the critical perspectives on social class that the novel invites. Furthermore, students made use of textual discussions to reaffirm their own social class identities, by presenting interpretations that were congruent with rather than contrary to those identities (Thein et al., 2012). Thus, teachers can understand students' perpetuation of self-oriented responses as ways of maintaining their own cultural affiliations and identities.

How teachers' (inadvertent) deficit notions of students' readiness levels can limit engagement: In making pedagogical decisions about the lateral ethics of students, teachers may be complicit in perpetuating deficit-based assumptions of students' ability and readiness to engage in ethical dialogue. Drawing from an experience in which her colleagues warned her about the mixed-ability class she was taking up for the first time, Bedford (2015) cautions against teachers' real tendency to homogenise and limit their expectations of low-ability students, and instead use an asset-based model in which students' individual unique life experiences can be harnessed for interpreting literary texts portraying otherness. This presumption – often based on practical concerns about classroom management – is further exemplified in Boyd's (2002) lack of data from small-group discussions, which resulted from the teacher's resistance to facilitating independent discussions 'for fear that [the students] would "play around and get off task"' (p. 86). None of the students in the study was given opportunities to discuss the novels independently.

How teachers can actively affirm students' efforts at making textual connections with cultural and real-world concerns: Teachers who affirm student responses that connect their cultural backgrounds with real-world concerns and canonical texts can help facilitate ethical meaning-making. Shah (2013) observed how Muslim students in her multiracial British class inscribed their cultural identities in their readings of *The scarlet letter* in a way that gave rise to 'worldly readings of canonical texts' (p. 201). Rather than treating these as anachronistic mis-readings, she found that their conflations of Puritan culture with their own qualms concerning their faith and cultural practices produced both 'insightful and startling' responses (p. 199).

Likewise, Mohamud (2020) contends that teachers need to pay attention to students' funds of knowledge from outside the classroom, especially in the realm of racial identity. Ignoring this may result in teachers rejecting students' interpretations and undermining further invitations to discussion, a regret Mohamud (2020) has with regard to redirecting her students' frustration in class with the representation of Black lives in education and her knowledge of wider systemic inequities for ethnic minorities.

Similarly, Habib (2008) argues for a more conscious application of critical literacy to support students in learning about how the use of loaded words in mass media can mask the power of language to marginalise others. Despite few of his students coming from displaced backgrounds as depicted in the novel *Refugee boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah, they acknowledged how existing media representations led them to conflate

the terms 'terrorist' and 'refugee' (Habib, 2008, p. 48). This enabled them to examine how the author explores the errors easily made by second or foreign language speakers of English through the immigrant protagonist's efforts to assimilate.

Suzanne Choo's routines to cultivate ethical values
In her 2021 monograph *Teaching ethics through literature: The significance of ethical criticism in a global age*, Suzanne Choo conceptualised the literature classroom as a site for developing students' ethical values of empathy, hospitality and responsibility to the other through dispositional routines. For Choo (2021), students' dispositions are ethical in their concerns about the self in relation to others – rooted in 仁 [*ren*], or cosmopolitan love for one's family, one's community and then distant others in the world – and inculcated through social routines. The two routines of listening and bridge-building discussed below are ones that focus on perception and socialisation with others.

Pedagogical recommendation 1: Listening routines
Listening routines in classrooms are explicit inter–ventions in the symbolic classroom in which teachers develop a culture of respect and openness to other students' responses through the practice of active listening to each others' responses. Choo (2021) expands on this from her observation of a social routine in a Grade 10 literature class in Singapore, in which students were asked to speak about an Instagram poem of their choice for one minute uninterrupted, while the others listened without writing anything. The rest were then given 30 seconds to reflect on and record what their peer shared, what they learned and what questions they had. Subsequently, students participated in a 'gallery walk' group annotation activity, but were explicitly asked to extend their peers' comments or to affirm ones they resonated with or were convinced by. Choo (2021) explains that such routines of listening help to '[disrupt] the tendency to become absorbed in one's own ideas' (p. 130), nudging students out of their self-oriented responses.

How students practise reflective uptake of peers' responses: In Bedford's (2015) multicultural British class of Year 9 students deemed to have lower writing ability, whole-class discussions were a powerful strategy for engaging such students in considering text-to-world connections. Students brought different interpretations and perspectives, helping each other to understand and seek alternative meanings of texts that differed

from their own (Bedford, 2015). Similarly, in Del Nero's (2018) study, whole-class discussions on *Frankenstein* helped individual students broaden their understanding of the monster's private suffering to realise how social forces, rather than the monster, could be seen as the real villain of the story. Such metacognitive reflections and uptakes of differing perspectives in whole-class discussions of a Chinese novella set during the Cultural Revolution allowed one student in Louie's (2005) US-based study to extrapolate that 'if there were such a wide range of reactions in their small high school class, the decisions of the Chinese people [in the novel] must have been incredibly diverse as well' (p. 576).

How teachers can listen for dominant student voices to manage them: If left unmanaged, dominant student voices can control how other students negotiate the meaning of difference, resulting in the exclusion of those students' voices. Dressel (2005) observed that dominant students likely filled the void of interpretive authority in small-group discussions, leading students to produce interpretations and reflections in their Book Club Organizers that were remarkably similar.

Recommendation 2: Bridge-building routines
Choo (2021) posits that schools and teachers can help to 'facilitate relational learning and ways to foster deeper commitments to one another' (p. 131). Bridge-building opportunities are thus learning opportunities in which students collaborate with other students to create communities that explore issues of ethical significance at both local and global levels. An invitation to one student to share about themself can also invite other students to authentically witness and appreciate others' experiences, thus extending the practice of empathetic listening in the classroom (Choo, 2021).

How teachers can acknowledge students' existing funds of knowledge as productive resources: Teachers who attend to the affordances of knowledge from students' backgrounds can create increased ethical engagement, as students then become willing cultural educators and ambassadors for peers to learn from in relation to a text's representation of others (Bedford, 2015, p. 340). Bedford (2015), for example, welcomed two students from Ghana to teach the class about cultural practices depicted in the novel, which made them feel proud and empowered as both teachers and classmates learned from them (p. 341).

How teachers can create a conducive classroom climate of openness: In order to lead students toward other-oriented

stances, teachers can actively foster a culture of openness, enabling them to appreciate that texts are indeed open to multiple interpretations. Glazier and Seo (2005) observed how minority ethnic students particularly appreciated their teacher's ability to foster a conducive environment for discussion through verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Teachers can also openly tolerate students' non-standard forms of language use and culture, which can enable students to speak freely in whole-class discussions (Yandell, 2008).

Moreover, even if inappropriate student responses provoke discomfort within the classroom, teachers can intervene and model non-judgemental stances instead of confrontational ways of calling others out. In Moore and Begoray's (2017) study centring on the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, students called each other out on inappropriate comments on trauma literature, which led to tension and discomfort in the classroom. The teacher addressed these confrontational stances at both individual and class level, modelling how students can instead 'call out to encourage another during discussions' (Moore & Begoray, 2017, p. 178), which helped to maintain an open and respectful culture of discussion.

How teachers can open supportive channels to manage adverse student responses to provocative issues: In discussion of their unit on trauma literature, Moore and Begoray (2017) highlight how teachers' facilitation of safe, welcoming classroom spaces 'for exploring trauma literature encourages mindfulness, empathy, and ally behaviors, all helpful qualities when engaging adolescents in social action' (p. 174). The teacher of this class offered to have 'private meetings' and 'frequent check-ins between classes' to help foster teacher-student trust, leading to prosocial behaviours such as students posting trigger warnings when publicly sharing their creative writing. Subsequently, when some students dismissed the severity of sexual assault in class discussions, the teacher created separate channels of communication outside of the public classroom space which helped them connect with the beliefs of a resistant student and understand his seeming dismissiveness (pp. 178–79).

Conclusion: Towards a reception-oriented ethical criticism of intersubjective interpretation for literature education

To date there has been little attempt to place the field of ethical criticism in colligation with existing studies that examine student responses to ethically oriented literature pedagogies. This integrative literature reviews has shown that when taken together, scholarship in both literary studies and literature education – disparate as the fields are individually – shares affinities in encouraging real readers to take up the ethical invitations that literary texts afford (Gregory, 2010). The ongoing concern around addressing self-oriented student responses in classroom studies of ethically oriented literature pedagogies points to the need for a greater conceptual mapping of the spectrum of ethical responses students can express, from receptive to resistant and self-oriented to receptive and other-oriented stances. As such, a reception-oriented ethical criticism that connects the ethical concerns of (in) justice and openness to others with the hermeneutical process of meaning-making and situates it in the intersubjective space of pedagogical interactions and classroom discourse would be helpful in teacher education to enable literature educators to anticipate a range of possible student responses, and consciously facilitate and intervene in classroom discourse when engaging with ethically complex discussions of texts. Robert Eaglestone's (2019) metaphor of a 'living conversation' (p. 38) reminds us that dialogic study is 'the "core event" of [the] discipline' of literary studies (p. 49). In the intersubjective public space of the classroom, the shared and communal nature of close reading is not just a 'skill', but an *'activity*, something you *do* with others, as an open-ended conversation with the literary text' (Eaglestone, 2019, p. 47, original italics). Yet Eaglestone (2019) also acknowledges that risks abound: just as we seek to keep a proper conversation open and generative, so too can we 'exclude people, offend them, refuse to listen to them, ignore them, only hear what we want to hear' (p. 18).

Seen in this light, the initial colligation of ethical criticism and classroom studies raises several unresolved tensions. Firstly, as both ethical critic Gregory (2010) and multiple classroom studies (Boyd, 2002; Dressel, 2005; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b) recognise, it is difficult to extrapolate long-term transformative impacts on readers' and students' ethical dispositions after engaging with literary texts, whether in one private reading or an entire literature unit. Students' shifting perceptions of other cultures as represented in literary texts were not linear, but often tenuous and 'defined simultaneously by forward momentum, stops and (re)starts, and confusion and clarity' (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019b, p. 617). Also, while student responses in individual and group assignments may reflect a

recognition of the unique worldviews and autonomy of characters from non-dominant groups, after completing an ethically oriented unit of study, they may also revert to pre-unit attitudes of showing minimal consideration for other, minority groups (Dressel, 2005). Teachers seeking to cultivate students' receptivity to difference may therefore find their engagement more perfunctory than comprehensive, more temporary than enduring.

Secondly, it is important for teachers to consider that classrooms are spaces in which students experiment with different facets and versions of their identities as learners and individuals, and it would be too simplistic to conflate their biological identity markers with their own personal identities (Yandell, 2008). Both Rabinowitz (2010) and multiple other studies emphasise that educators must account for the ways in which social norms influence students to retain self-oriented stances towards others. Teachers themselves may also be complicit in creating 'emotional rules' around acceptable responses that cause seemingly democratic classroom spaces to become static instead, as students limit their discussion perspectives to expected discourse (Thein et al., 2015). Moreover, teachers should avoid assuming students from multicultural backgrounds share common experiences because of their marginalised ethnic positions (Bedford, 2015).

Third, Choo's (2021) recommendations around listening and bridge-building routines to cultivate ethical values can speak to the need for teachers to consciously adjust and intervene in the dominant New Criticism and Reader Response-driven interpretive frameworks that focus on close reading and personal responses, which would otherwise limit students' ethical engagement with texts (Boyd, 2002; Thein et al., 2011). In both structured and unstructured classroom discourse, teachers can intentionally sensitise students to how language can subtly reinforce dominant ideologies, influencing discussion talk by adopting more active voices over passive ones that avoid taking responsibility for their own views (Dressel, 2005). Teachers can also explicitly foreground critical-ethical responses in the structured literature circle discussions that traditionally emphasise personal responses (Thein et al., 2011; 2012). However, even with explicit instructions about perspective-taking, students may simply go through the motions before defaulting to single-minded or literal readings of the text (Thein & Sloan, 2012).

Booth's (1998) practical suggestions about introducing conflicts in and confrontations of ethical

values via conscious text selection are pertinent to present scholarship in Australia. However, given that classroom studies have raised both the affordances and the limitations of text selection by foregrounding students' idiosyncratic classroom contexts, further study is needed to explore how the proposed engagement of diverse others and perspectives by Australian educators would be received and negotiated at the level of classroom discourse. Furthermore, given that most summative forms of assessment in educational curriculums expect students to produce written forms of literary criticism, which pushes teachers to balance the demands of high-stakes external assessment with meaningful ethical engagement in classrooms (Portelli & O'Sullivan, 2016), future research investigations can attend to formulating meaningful assessments of ethical dialogue for creating learning dispositions of empathy, hospitality and responsibility to the other.

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'The Practice of Freedom': Thoughts Towards Realigning the Priorities of Secondary and Tertiary Literature Educators

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Abstract: bell hooks's famous reflections on the limitations and opportunities of education, and on the differences between the secondary and tertiary classroom, still hold true today. Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) also recognise the lack of dialogue between secondary and tertiary study in the field of English Literature. This article outlines some of the misalignments between the priorities of secondary and tertiary educators in English and proposes some ways to move towards realignment. Like hooks, we are interested in the dynamics of the classroom at each level, but we also extend this to focus on what 'freedom' might look like in the practice of critical writing – typically the core assessable outcome of any literary studies program. Ultimately, holding 'education as freedom' as a priority for both secondary and tertiary educators is a necessary precondition for the alignment and continuity of education for contemporary students.

Keywords: hooks, Freire, secondary English, tertiary English, freedom, academic writing

Introduction

> Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

In *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*, hooks (1994) describes her own experience as an undergraduate and postgraduate student, observing that '[i]t surprised and shocked me to sit in classes where professors were not excited about teaching, where they did not seem to have a clue that education was about the practice of freedom' (p. 4). The 'all-black' secondary classrooms in which hooks had studied in the years following the Civil Rights Movement in the United States (1954–1968) had instilled in her a belief in the freedom and opportunity that education could bring; by contrast, the tertiary classroom felt like 'a prison, a place of punishment and confinement rather than a place of promise and possibility' (hooks, 1991, p. 4). As a professor, hooks follows a Freirean philosophy in which it is the educator's core responsibility to reinforce and inspire the conceptualisation of education as freedom in their classroom, whether it is at the secondary or tertiary, or even primary, level. Critically, it is through transgression and disruption that the educator motivates creativity, pleasure and enjoyment in their students, as hooks (1991) makes clear. But 'transgressing boundaries [can be] frightening' (hooks, 1991, p. 9). Educators and students alike find comfort and safety in the quotidian and the dull, or security in the prescribed, such as the four mandated task types in the senior English syllabus (QCAA, 2018). In so doing, they miss education's very purpose: freedom.

hooks's (1991) reflections on the limitations and opportunities of education, and on the differences between secondary and tertiary classrooms, still hold true today. Indeed, in a recent issue of this journal Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) also recognised the lack of

dialogue between secondary and tertiary study in the field of English Literature. In this article we outline some of the misalignments between the priorities of secondary and tertiary educators in English and offer some proposals for ways to move towards realignment, always with the 'practice of education as freedom' in mind. Like hooks, we are interested in the dynamics of the classroom at each level, but we also extend this to focus on what 'freedom' might look like in the practice of critical writing – typically the core assessable outcome of any literary studies program. Ultimately, we conclude, holding 'education as freedom' as a priority for both secondary and tertiary educators is a necessary precondition for the alignment and continuity of education for contemporary students.

Misalignments in purpose and practice

Just a few years ago, Nussbaum (2017) heralded a common belief about the crisis of the humanities: the recognition that

> The humanities and the arts are being cut away, in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policy-makers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children (p. 2).

For Kuttainen and Hansen (2020), greater collaboration between secondary and tertiary English literature educators is one strategy which could slow the decline in enrolments in university literature programs. However, while there are both professional development and 'interest and engagement' benefits which can arise from secondary/tertiary relationships, the fundamental forms and functions of the two programs as they appear in Australia do not currently align in a way that would solve the crisis of enrolment in the humanities. Indeed, as Yates et al. (2019) note, 'it is well accepted that the school subject and the disciplinary field have at least some distinct origins, purposes and differences of scope, and possibly major ones' (p. 57).

The satisfactory completion of an ATAR-eligible English course is a prerequisite for enrolment into most Bachelor degrees. This means almost all students seeking an Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) will undertake English, although very few of them will go on to study literature at university (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2020). In Queensland, General English is the ATAR-eligible option studied by most students. The subject Literature, which includes more literary and canonical texts and hence has greater alignment with tertiary literary studies, is taken by fewer than 3000 students statewide. Queensland also offers English and Literature Extension, which differs markedly from the other offerings and has a strong focus on literary theory. This is the only offering that provides a clear line-of-sight to tertiary literary studies, but only 640 students completed this subject in 2021 (QCAA, 2022).

The gap between secondary and tertiary English can thus be attributed to the fundamentally different purposes of the two programs. Secondary English is designed to develop a broad suite of critical literacy skills that will allow graduates to navigate everyday texts such as popular novels and news media, and develop a toolkit of professional communication skills, including writing for a range of audiences and some public speaking. In contrast, the study of English literature in a tertiary setting is much more targeted towards the close analysis of a range of texts, working within genres, periods or themes. Traditional or canonical literature dominates, but such programs of study also increasingly include film, television and other artefacts of popular culture. The discipline places a heavy emphasis on developing an understanding of those works within both their relevant sociohistorical and cultural contexts and the context of their critical and popular reception, as well as on exploring them through the lenses of narrative and cultural theories. The way students demonstrate this understanding is heavily weighted towards the production of research essays which showcase their analysis of the primary text/s and the secondary materials which collect around it. Although other modes of assessment, such as formal examinations, online quizzes and learning diaries or participation, are frequently implemented, the research essay remains the dominant outcome for which the literature student is trained. The aim is to produce graduates who are confident in not only their grasp of the primary content (the texts), but also their ability to manipulate the many tools at hand through which that content (and any other) may be understood.

The aims of the secondary-level *Australian Curriculum: English* are that students:

- 'learn to purposefully and proficiently read, view, listen to, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex texts across a growing range of contexts

- understand how Standard Australian English works in its spoken and written forms, and in combination with non-linguistic forms of communication, to create meaning
- develop interest and skills in examining the aesthetic aspects of texts and develop an informed appreciation of literature
- appreciate, enjoy, analyse, evaluate, adapt and use the richness and power of the English language in all its variations to evoke feelings, form ideas and facilitate interaction with others'. (ACARA, 2022)

The broad scope of these objectives makes the lack of direct alignment between secondary English studies and the study of literature at university clear. The aims of the English Literature major at the University of Southern Queensland, for instance, emphasise employability outcomes as a requirement of Australian Quality Framework Level 7 (Bachelor Degree) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013), specifying that:

- 'The English Literature major fosters your passion for great writing and develops valuable skills in forming critical arguments, conducting research and documenting evidence.
- Study in this area encourages you to be analytical and to develop a clear and expressive writing style in a range of modes.
- Explore the great works of literature as well as innovative and contemporary works of poetry, prose, drama, film, new media and critical essays.
- Prepare yourself for the jobs of a changing world by building skills in forming critical arguments, developing cross-cultural understanding, and applying a clear and expressive writing style'. (University of Southern Queensland, 2023)

A 2014 study by the Australian University Heads of English also found little alignment between the goals of secondary and tertiary English. The report observes that English curriculum documents focus on the development of general reading and writing skills, 'emotional intelligence' and skills in sociocultural critique, while neglecting to include strategies which might develop students' skills in interpretation, research, selection of evidence and development of arguments (AUHE 2014, pp. 14–15). Thus the shift from secondary to tertiary study in English appears to also constitute a shift from subjectivity (including 'appreciation' and the goal of 'evok[ing] feelings') to

objectivity (being 'analytical', 'clear', and 'critical'). Indeed, a common hurdle we observe for students undertaking undergraduate study is the recognition of the difference between one's feelings or opinions ('I believe …') and an informed interpretation based on evidence ('I argue …'). In this respect, the use of the first-person pronoun in a research essay can cause consternation in students as they begin to navigate the adoption of a critical research persona in their tertiary academic writing, as the secondary curriculum typically asserts that objectivity is only possible through the adoption of a third-person voice.

Another misalignment between secondary and tertiary English lies in the motivation underpinning text selection. While universities have been actively working to decolonise their reading lists and be more inclusive of minority and marginalised voices (see for instance Beyer, 2022), secondary English text selection has become a cultural battleground. As Yates et al. (2019) argue, text selections imply that 'the study of literature has significant fixed cultural and social implications' which 'tacitly assumes literary knowledge as relating to the text itself, rather than being located in the critic or reader' (p. 60). Without guidance in how to situate texts within the context of poststructuralist theoretical approaches, for instance, student readers can come to see literary meaning as rigid and authoritarian – and indeed, to find false comfort in such rigidity, wherein there is a 'right answer' to be found. Similar false comfort in assumptions of meaning can be seen in an insistence on a text's 'relatability', whereby texts are chosen for the way in which they appeal to young readers, and subsequently and tautologically celebrated for that very alignment with adolescent values. As Gildersleeve et al. (2021) have observed, relatability makes a text difficult to teach well, since its 'comforts' come to provide 'security, possibly too much security, for those seeking to avoid [a] novel's more contested spaces' (p. 87).

Text selection is not only shaped by the ideologies of a curriculum's authors. The prescribed text lists for English and Literature in Queensland offer a wide range of novels, plays, poems and films from which schools may select texts, and include canonical works, works by First Nations authors and a range of diverse voices focused on a broad range of issues (QCAA, 2021). However, the material pressures on secondary teachers in terms of time and resourcing also work to keep the list of texts selected more limited. Text choices are in this sense 'made for practical reasons, and in

response to the school's "local realities"', as Brayshaw (2021) observes. As Davies et al. (2021) have found, such

> barriers included a lack of time and support to develop their knowledge, … conservative text selection policies, workload and time pressures, student literacy and the high-stakes assessment environment. Taken together, these various institutional and political restrictions faced by teachers attempting to implement new literary perspectives and curriculum resources exist as deterrents to changing text selection practices. (pp. 824–825)

Jones and Dowsett's (2023) recent work in Western Australia found that the renewed reemphasis on Australian literature, which is akin to that in Queensland's syllabus, has contributed to a 'parochial canon'; while Australian writers, including First Nations authors, are now regularly included in school text lists, there are still only a select few who dominate the market, such as Tim Winton and Craig Silvey. Jones and Dowsett (2023) conclude that while this greater representation of Australian voices is valuable, there is scope for expansion in the range of texts selected, and that this could be best achieved through greater 'participation in the secondary-tertiary nexus

through the critical engagement of writers, academics and teachers in robust conversations relating to subject English in Australia and the teaching of Australian literature' (p. 13). These obstacles to a wide or varied selection of texts ultimately also impact assessment options at the secondary level, compared to tertiary study, where an imperative to consider theoretical approaches and experimental texts as well as to build on the specific research expertise of a course designer implicitly demand greater diversity in both text selection and assessment tasks.

At the secondary level, the Queensland English External Examination provides a list of eight texts from which schools may select the texts they will examine (see Figure 1). This seemingly small number is a subset of 29 novels and prose texts available for selection across all other assessment items in the course (plus two plays by Shakespeare). A large part of this limitation on examination texts is practical: writing comparable examinations for 31 texts, and having a cohort of markers suitably familiar with all of them to undertake marking, is simply unmanageable. The subset, however, echoes some of Jones and Dowsett's (2023) points about the complexity of text

Prescribed text list: English and EAL 2023–2025

External assessment texts 2022	External assessment texts 2023
• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Cat's Eye* — Margaret Atwood* • *Hamlet* — William Shakespeare • *Jane Eyre* — Charlotte Brontë • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Nineteen Eighty-Four* — George Orwell* • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler	• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Hamlet* — William Shakespeare* • *Jane Eyre* — Charlotte Brontë* • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler
External assessment texts 2024	External assessment texts 2025
• *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *Othello* — William Shakespeare • *Pride and Prejudice* — Jane Austen • *The White Earth* — Andrew McGahan* • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch • *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* — Karen Joy Fowler*	• *All the Light We Cannot See* — Anthony Doerr • *Burial Rites* — Hannah Kent* • *Macbeth* — William Shakespeare* • *Never Let Me Go* — Kazuo Ishiguro • *Othello* — William Shakespeare • *Pride and Prejudice* — Jane Austen • *The Dry* — Jane Harper • *The Yield* — Tara June Winch

Note: * indicates the last year this text will appear on the external assessment list.

Figure 1. External Examination text list (QCAA, 2021, 3)

selection and the resultant narrowing that occurs. Here there are three Australian writers (37.5%), with Shakespeare making up another quarter of the options. Rounding out the list are a British and an American canonical work, plus Ishiguro's and Fowler's popular contemporary fictions. In other words, while the prescribed text list itself is quite wide-ranging, the EA list is helpful in revealing the underlying priorities of the syllabus: Australian literature, Shakespeare and canonical works still make up the vast majority of the available texts, and the response is expected to be in essay form, although not one that would be assessed highly in a tertiary setting, as is explored in the next section.

The objectives of secondary and tertiary English, and the initial ways in which these are delivered via the construction of the curriculum and text selection, thus present critical misalignments in purpose and practice, and too often fail to emphasise an ideology of 'education as freedom'. We now turn to a comparison of the ways in which students are required and taught to deliver their understanding of that core content in order to think about how composition – the primary mode of assessment in the literature classroom – might be mobilised towards hooks's ideology.

Misalignments in outcome

The quality and type of student responses produced in secondary and tertiary English courses are significantly misaligned. There are two key issues in this space: modes of assessment and the teaching of academic writing. The senior secondary English curriculum addresses a wide range of text types: using the Queensland senior syllabus as a case study, students are expected to produce creative responses, analyses, and both written and spoken texts (QCAA, 2018). While some tasks are completed as assignments, however, the culminating external assessment is completed under closed-book examination conditions, with no expectation that students will make use of direct quotations, refer to critical secondary materials or use citations in their responses. The value of external examinations such as this – which do not mirror disciplinary expectations, in which emphasis is placed instead on 'conducting research and documenting evidence' (University of Southern Queensland, 2023) – has been shown to be less than that of internal assessments in the humanities, including English (Johnston et al., 2022, pp. 316–317). As this is a culminating assessment at the end of a student's secondary studies, the misalignment

with tertiary expectations and learning objectives here is clear. The need for close textual analysis in literary studies means examinations have fallen out of favour in university English courses, and been replaced by a diverse range of assessment practices designed to capture different learning outcomes. Moreover, not only is explicit engagement with the field through effective research vital to the development of critical evaluation skills, but the expectation also that students will follow correct quotation and citation conventions is a core pillar of academic integrity. This mismatch between the expectations of secondary English and tertiary objectives and policies presents challenges as students transition to university study.

This misalignment in expectations around student responses also extends to the anticipated structure of academic writing, particularly the essay. The proscription of assessment task types within the senior syllabus means that teachers seek out a 'formula' that will allow students to respond effectively. In secondary English and humanities classrooms, this means the five-paragraph essay, which has become the default model for academic writing (Johnson et al., 2003). This approach, which is particularly dominant in the United States at both secondary and tertiary levels and in L2 classrooms (Caplan & Johns, 2019), has also been widely adopted in Australia. As Lucinda McKnight (2023) argues, in Australian schools

> pedagogies including direct instruction, modelling, scaffolding, and genre-based approaches involve the implementation of formulas for writing sentences, paragraphs, and entire essays; this has taken place in the neoliberal context of tightly proscribed, high stakes testing regimes that often demand the reproduction of these formulas (p. 571).

While there is no doubt that formulaic models provide a sound foundation for learning the core elements of essay structure, the safety of this expected structure discourages students and teachers alike from experimenting and extending upon this base. In addition, it can restrict creative and critical thought by requiring repetition, and can encourage students to tend towards simply signposting, rather than actually making an argument. The weaknesses of this model therefore directly refer to Freire's (1970/2017) discussion of dialogue and authenticity in *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, in which he rails against 'false words', 'idle chatter' – 'an alienated and alienating "blah"' (pp. 60–61). It is precisely in claiming the right to speak, he insists, that the student 'prevent[s] the

continuation of … dehumanising aggression' and comes to 'achieve significance as human beings' (Freire, 1970/2017, p. 61). That is, it is only in speaking (or writing) authentically that the student may demonstrate 'education as freedom' rather than the current mode of education as compliance. Such a belief system is also at the core of Shor's (1992) work on the construction of a democratic classroom. Shor (1992) shows how collaboration, revision and dialogue not only improve assessment scores, but also true learning. These ideas and opportunities are more available in tertiary settings, where a wider range of response styles is both taught and expected. Yet students arrive from their secondary classrooms with the limiting five-paragraph model or other formulaic approach entrenched as their core mode of writing.

Realignments: A way forward?

Given the fundamental differences in the form and function of secondary and tertiary English studies, attempts to create greater connection or coherence between the two are unlikely to achieve significant reform. Rather, an approach that acknowledges each sector's differing objectives and leverages their strengths may have greater impact. While there are only about 600 students taking English and Literature Extension in Year 12, there are tens of thousands of English teachers across the country. As an example, the English Teachers' Association of Queensland caters to approximately 4,500 English teachers through both corporate and personal memberships (T. Purcell, personal communication, January 24, 2023). Targeting teachers rather than students may assist in realigning the secondary/tertiary relationship. Indeed, Kuttainen and Hansen (2020) make the point that particular 'behavioural patterns' (p. 49) are necessary to strengthen and solidify this relationship, including regular, sociable interactions between educators at both levels, diverse and engaging events for both students and teachers, and a fostering of these connections through informality and approachability. In other words, collaboration at the individual level is critical to moving some way towards rectifying some of the misalignments we have outlined here.

Changes to modes of assessment in secondary English in order to place greater emphasis on academic integrity and writing conventions which align with tertiary expectations would also be an 'easy fix' to one of the most problematic issues in terms of academic rigour within the senior syllabus. While the five-paragraph essay is a good foundational structure for basic academic argument, high-quality academic writing is more dynamic and fluid, relying less on formula. This is not a new insight (Schwartz, 2014; Warner, 2018), yet secondary school systems have not made changes to modes of assessment within the syllabus that would encourage teachers and students to experiment with more complex forms of academic writing. 'Discernment' suggests an ability to tailor the response to enhance the argument, rather than the reproduction of a formulaic response, and it is this ability to organise an essay based on the most logical structure for the argument being made that is prized in tertiary settings. The formulaic paragraph, and essay, should therefore be seen as a 'suitable' response rather than a 'discerning' one, and thus aligned to a C (or satisfactory) grade descriptor: 'suitable use of patterns and conventions' (QCAA, 2019, p. 33). If the quality assurance processes in place made this distinction clear, teachers and students would rapidly move away from the 'safety' of this essay form to perform at the higher standard, and demonstrate genuine discernment and freedom in how they construct their arguments. Tertiary academics should thus work closely with senior secondary English teachers (both in-service and pre-service) via formal education channels and professional development workshops to further develop the academic writing repertoires of teachers, and, in turn, their students.

Systemic change in education, as in many sectors, is glacially slow and impeded by both internal and external forces, a 'network of systems … increasingly directed by external and inward facing pressures that stymie ways of reaching outward across sectors to each other, to focus on the shared, higher goals of engagement and excitement with English literariness and literacy' (Kuttainen & Hansen, 2002, p. 41). Perhaps the greatest hope for change and for a movement towards a value system that prioritises 'education as freedom' is a model that equips secondary students with a range of writing skills that prepare them not only for studies in literature but tertiary academic writing at large. To achieve this, a number of things need to occur. The first is greater connection between university and secondary staff, to allow for professional development. This happens in ad hoc ways now, but a more formal or extensive relationship could be developed through teachers' associations. It is not uncommon for university lecturers to give guest presentations for teachers' associations, but these tend to be centred

on particular texts rather than on teaching academic (or creative) writing. There thus needs to be not only support for the development of local relationships with academics, but also the fostering of a more widespread shared understanding of how students can write in a 'discerning' way, so that the systemic processes of quality assurance do not actively disadvantage those teachers and students who break out of the mould.

By extension, secondary teachers might then engage in more explicit modelling of the expectations of tertiary writing for their students. This might occur through changes to the assessment modes within the syllabus and the use of university assessment responses as examples. One example of this might be revising secondary-level assessment tasks that do not require direct quotes or citations to support responses (QCAA, 2019). These tasks lack the basic academic rigour and integrity expected of any tertiary student, and establish a poor precedent for good academic writing. Such responses are typically produced in examination conditions, where students are not permitted copies of the text being analysed. Universities have moved away from examinations in English literature courses for precisely these reasons, and yet (perhaps in response to concerns around academic integrity) secondary schools seem to be reintroducing more examinations to their syllabi. Modifying examination conditions to allow students to reference copies of the text, or adopting modes of assessment other than the examination, would potentially address this major inconsistency.

The most significant move towards freedom of writing lies in secondary teachers' perception of what a 'discerning' essay looks like: if formulaic essays are getting top marks, there is little impetus to change. The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots like ChatGPT, which can produce human-like responses, also creates an impetus for change in assessment types in both secondary schools and universities. Creativity in response constitutes an inducement to distinguish a student response from an AI response. Thus, both assessment modes and the teaching of academic writing are under renewed pressure to change.

Conclusion

While greater collaboration between secondary and tertiary educators will go some way towards realigning student writing, ultimately it is the curriculum that must change. If modes of assessment at secondary level better mirror tertiary expectations, while still catering for the much broader range of form and

function that the secondary curriculum has, this would go some way to better supporting students' transitions to tertiary learning and to implementing a philosophy of education as freedom. Most significantly, we propose an insistence on the creation of assessment standards that no longer reward the formulaic essay as 'discerning'. In an educational system where assessment success is core, the only way to achieve real change in teacher and student practice is to move the assessment goalposts so that there is an impetus for change. This requires not only advocacy from secondary teachers, but greater involvement from tertiary educators in the development of the secondary curriculum itself.

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YA Dystopian Fiction

The Whole World: Reading Key Themes from YA Dystopian Fiction in *Hive*, by A.J. Betts

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Abstract: Critical interest in Young Adult (YA) dystopian fiction often centres on commercially successful novels from large literary markets in the United Kingdom and United States. Discussions focus on the parallels between adolescent social-emotional development and storylines where teenagers struggle for freedom within dystopian societies. This article seeks to test an Australian novel for younger adult readers, *Hive* by A.J. Betts (2018) against key themes from these discourses. Set in the future, *Hive* portrays teenager Hayley, who discovers physical and metaphysical cracks in her world that thrust her on a journey towards truth. This reading is focused through three key themes from scholarly literature: conservative undertones in dystopian world-building; the erasure of non-hegemonic aspects of identity; and the limitations of the deviant hero/heroine's ability to inspire action. The discussion aims to heighten awareness of Australian literatures in this field, and questions for class discussion throughout aim to support learning in English classrooms.

Introduction

'The early twenty-first century will be recognized as a golden age of Young Adult literature', declared Burke (2015, p. 544), pointing for example to *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008) and its sequels for their ambitious tackling of pressing environmental issues, unjust global food production systems, and social oppression. *The Hunger Games*, an international bestseller (Levithan, 2018), and other commercially successful titles feature prominently in scholarly discourses around Young Adult (YA) literatures, but how well does Burke's claim embrace other, lesser-known titles from less influential markets?

For a text to be classified as YA fiction, it needs to fulfil three criteria: it must feature a teenage protagonist, be written specifically for a teenage audience, and be emotionally challenging or intense, such that the protagonist faces genuine challenges (Booth & Narayan, 2018). Clear parameters, however, do not necessarily spread attention evenly across the field. As Booth and Narayan (2018) remarks, because the publishing industry in Australia is significantly smaller than those in the United States and United Kingdom, Australian texts are vulnerable to being overshadowed by the international reach and publicity of international titles. Given this reality, recognising and valuing stories from home soil seems an important aspect of cultural awareness. Further, representations of diverse characters and situations in local contexts brings literature closer *to* home, where its provocative potential is harder to ignore or relegate to 'fantasy'. For these reasons, this article conducts a focused reading of an Australian novel that would be a suitable study for Years 9 or 10: *Hive* by A.J. Betts (2018), a futuristic story about a teenage girl, Hayley, who uncovers secrets about her world that she cannot ignore. The discussion singles out key themes in scholarly discourses around YA dystopia that typically draw from popular and commercially successful books and series to establish their claims. Through a literary analysis of *Hive* that is critically informed by these themes, it aims to increase critical attention towards

Australian YA literature and support the teaching of Australian literatures in secondary schools both within and outside of Australia.

One recurrent thread in critical discourses around YA literature is that this field is ideally placed to represent diversity and encourage the valuing of social inclusion (Hourihan, 2014). Another is the parallel between adolescent social-emotional development and personal and collective resistance, which is often led by teenage protagonists living under dystopic regimes. As Connors (2017) states, YA dystopias have an 'overt concern with political issues' (p. 8) such as the control of citizens, especially teenagers. Thus it is important to teach adolescents to read YA dystopian fiction critically, as it can help them better understand the freedoms they do have, the potential for change where required, and to see models for 'more socially just ways of living together' (Connors, 2021, p. 85). Gruner (2019) also draws a connection between literacy and 'democratic practice' (p. 145), quoting Brazilian educator Paolo Freire, who said that we learn to read 'the word and the world' to encounter political agency (1987, as cited in Gruner, 2019, p. 145). To Gruner (2019), this involves reading that leads to understanding that engenders interactions based on 'parity rather than exploitation … a kind of democratic citizenship that looks to the future with hope rather than despair' (p. 145). These are lofty claims for the impacts YA literatures can have on adolescent identity and motivation, but Connors (2021) pushes back against idealism by asserting that YA dystopian fiction 'both participates in and resists neoliberal discourses' (p. 85) that emphasise individualism, competition and win-or-lose mentalities rather than the benefit of all. YA dystopian fiction that draws an exceptional individual into battle with a corrupt government, and has that individual succeeding in bringing about change, endorses neoliberalism's meritocratic ideologies by 'suggesting that individuals, rather than institutions, are best positioned to work for social justice' (Connors, 2021, p. 90). YA dystopian literatures thus can be considered potential sites of rich critical conversations among teenage readers.

Underlying some of these arguments about the functions of YA literatures and the responsibilities of adolescent readers are urgent undertones that are perhaps remnants or reminders of romantic notions of childhood innocence, which might be 'taken as the promise of a renewal of the world by the children' (Bühler-Niederberger, 2017, para. 1). Certainly, serious real-world problems are rarely far from dystopian fiction in general, with YA dystopias being no different: to world hunger, one can add themes around climate change, war, economic security, racism and marginalisation, all swimming in the currents of social justice movements.

In addition to *The Hunger Games*, other books and series that feature prominently in scholarly discussion of YA dystopias include *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011) and even *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro, 2005), which while not aimed exclusively at the YA market does feature adolescent protagonists who must support each other in the face of generational oppression. All these texts gained even greater notice, and commercial profit, through their mainstream film adaptations. These novels (and films) were also successful in Australia, and their engaging storylines and provocative themes continue to enrich Australian classrooms. This discussion thus rests on the claim that lessons involving YA dystopian fiction can be enriched through the inclusion of literature about Australian teenagers and Australian social, political and environmental realities.

This purpose aligns closely with my own experience. I teach a unit in children's and YA literature to university students, the majority of whom are enrolled through the Bachelor of Education program, preparing to teach English in schools. The course I inherited was a predominantly historicist survey of traditional and familiar texts from the United Kingdom, plus a few recent titles from the United States, including *The Hunger Games*. The second time I delivered the course, I was compelled to condense the historical lens to one module and create a second with an Australian focus, including texts by First Nations, and gender-diverse writers. I aimed to encourage among my students a greater awareness of Australian texts without fostering a myopic view of literature. This approach would, I hoped, enact the axiom to 'think global, act local', and in doing so bring important conversations about reading, power and justice to my students' front yards, respecting cultural sovereignty without compromising literary and critical depth and breadth.

Hive is one text that I introduced to my own course because it provides many opportunities to explore key themes in YA literature in an Australian context. In line with Booth's criteria, the novel's central protagonist is a teenage girl, Hayley; its target audience is early adolescence; and the story sees Hayley's life thrust into chaos that disrupts her certainty, sense of self

and safety. Hayley's emotional journey is thus intense. *Hive* also enables a particular focus on YA dystopia. Its world-building is initially ambiguous: is Hayley living in a dystopia or a utopia? Hints of environmental crises and precarity are present, and an uneasy social structuring raises questions about power and control, but Hayley seems initially oblivious to the risks embedded in the status quo. *Hive* portrays a world that is familiar, yet different – a place that is enclosed and seemingly forgotten. And yet the reader cannot be certain if this world is refuge or prison, preservation or punishment. Readers of *Hive* might reasonably conclude that Hayley's journey involves a crisis of meaning resulting from trauma, as conceptualised by Jones (2021), who argues that because we can assume that our students are also 'grappling with complex issues' we should see English, which is 'devoted to the analysis, discussion and representation of meanings', as the ideal vehicle to engage students in explorations of trauma (p. 54). Themes in *Hive* are thus multilayered.

There are, however, some limitations to using *Hive* as a study. *Hive* is the first in a duology that includes a sequel, *Rogue* (Betts, 2019). Each novel is set in a different location, or 'world' – the first inside the 'hive' and the second outside of it – with the sequel providing some explanations for the situation the reader encounters in *Hive*. Together the two texts form a complete narrative about the environment, social and environmental justice, and technology, but for the reader there is no way of knowing at the end of *Hive* what they will find in *Rogue*. What does Hayley encounter outside? It is also very likely that English teachers will feel too constrained by the curriculum to cover the duology, and that if the series is selected for reading, only the first of the two will be chosen. The analysis contained in this discussion is therefore pragmatically limited to what can be gleaned from reading *Hive* alone, to mirror and inform the typical school reading experience in Australia.

This limitation is not confined to this duology. As we have seen, many well-known dystopian texts are part of a series, and when they are chosen, often only the first instalment is included for study (*The Hunger Games* is a popular choice for Year 10 English), with similar impacts from missing half or more of the full story. Nevertheless, where it seems necessary to show that analysis of *Hive* must be qualified, brief reference to *Rogue* will be included.

The remainder of this discussion involves a summary of the plot of *Hive*, elaboration of key themes from the critical literature on YA dystopian literature, and consideration of the applicability of these themes to this Australian YA novel. To support classroom learning, questions are posed throughout for the pre-, during-, and post (reflective)- stages of the reading process.

Pre-reading questions
- What do dystopia and utopia mean?
- Do you see aspects of either of these in our current society?
- What other dystopian texts have your read or viewed?
- Why do you think dystopian themes are popular in books for young adults?

Hive – a summary

Figure 1. Cover of Hive *by A.J. Betts.*

While temporality is not made explicit at the beginning of *Hive*, Hayley's first-person narration hints that she is speaking from a place and time outside of this world. The novel opens with, 'We had no word for *ocean*. Why would we?' (Betts, 2018, p. 1), suggesting that Hayley's reality is circumscribed. Another comment that conjures temporal and spatial dislocation is, 'Marriage in our world, wasn't a commitment for life'' (Betts, 2018, p. 86) – an observation that can only be made with the knowledge that in other contexts it might be. At the conclusion of the prologue, Hayley tells us, 'The truth is, I'm here because of madness' (Betts, 2018, p. 3). 'Here', we understand, means in a

pickle – not where one is supposed to be. In time, the reader understands that madness can simply mean headaches, but also figuratively refers to the suffering experienced when natural urges to wonder, question and seek truth are discouraged and punished.

The world is a hexagonal container of some kind, with a capped ceiling dotted with globes that change colours to signal periods of work, rest, eating and socialising. A rigid physical design is mirrored in a strict social structure of three hundred people. Gender is binary and portrayed as natural: girls enjoy braiding each other's hair; boys flex their muscles. Children are raised in a communal nursery before being allocated to a designated role: gardener, netter, engineer or teacher, among others. A ruling hereditary elite consisting of the Judge and her offspring (the Son) preserves the status quo. There is a flourishing market garden, a healthy bee colony, and 'the Source' – a fountain that is believed to provide water gifted by God. We learn that environmental care is a priority, and that resources seem balanced and sufficient. The metaphorical allusions to the highly effective organisation of bees – a necessary yet threatened species in our actual world – are pointed.

And yet there are cracks. The story's inciting incident occurs when Hayley, a beekeeper, ventures to a cool, dark, unused corridor to seek respite from headpains. Headpains are suspicious occurrences that signal madness – 'the greatest shame' (Betts, 2018, p. 27) – and thus Hayley desires to keep her condition secret. In addition to solitude, Hayley seeks reprieve through the comfort of sitting and sleeping at the foot of trees, a plot point that appears increasingly in YA literature where plants are portrayed as 'communicators' or 'kin' (Duckworth & Guanio-Uluru, 2021, p. 1).

Hayley becomes aware of a drip from the ceiling. This is evidently unheard of – water only comes from the Source. Hayley also realises she is not alone. The Son is in the dark too, apparently to mend the drip. Thus the plot is triggered: Hayley's curiosity is sparked and she starts to ask *why*? Questioning is a deviance that threatens a community sustained by conformity. The burden of *difference* isolates Hayley, even from her best friend Celia, and threatens her mental health and security.

The enclosed world with its rigid, lit ceiling, the threat of drips, and a hub through which fish are harvested strongly suggest that the world is under water, but this is not confirmed until the final pages of the novel. Yet in addition to the chain of events triggered by the single drip in the opening scene, water features in several other key moments. This is consistent with a trend observed in children's literature in which water imagery signifies meditation on humankind's purpose in relation to the natural landscape (Jaques, 2014). For example, it is while sitting by the hub, marvelling at her first sight of phosphorescence, that Hayley comes to understand that she knows too much and that this will not be allowed.

The Son devises an escape for Hayley, telling her that 'There's another world. Out there' (Betts, 2018, p. 232) with which their world (only four-generations ago) lost contact in a fire that destroyed 'their *phones* and *screens* and *internet*' (p. 236). Importantly, he admits to Hayley that 'there's no such thing as madness … there's only migraines – headpains – and people who ask too many questions' (p. 240). These revelations affect Hayley existentially: 'The world seemed to be shrinking. Or was I expanding?' (p. 237). In the final paragraph, Hayley is curled into one half of a crib, rocking on the surface of the ocean, dazzled by the sun and a 'world that was too harsh for sight' (p. 259). What happens to Hayley from this point – what she encounters and learns about the origins of her world – are answers that are withheld until *Rogue*.

During reading questions
- How does the prologue influence the way you approach this novel? Why do you think the author chose to shape the reading in this way?
- The 'drip' is one sign that all is not well in Hayley's world. What are some other signals of stress, and what do they symbolise?
- Being a 'seeker of truth' is a lonesome burden for Hayley, and she both seeks out people to share the load with her and distrusts them. To what extent is Hayley's journey 'out' a solo or social one?
- *Hive* leaves the reader, along with Hayley, unsure about what comes next. What do you predict Hayley will discover? Do you believe she will encounter gains, or losses ahead?

Key themes in literature about YA dystopian fiction
Through the following close critical reading of *Hive,* the relevance and applicability of scholarly discourses around YA dystopian fiction are tested in an Australian context, drawing attention to sites of enquiry for English and literary study. The rest of this paper thus frames a reading of *Hive* against three key themes in this discourse – the conservative undertones in dystopian

world-building, the erasure of non-hegemonic aspects of identity, and the limitations of the deviant hero/heroine to inspire action – to see if central claims made about other dystopian texts pertain to *Hive*.

Conservative undertones in dystopian world-building

Dystopian fiction typically presents a horrific vision of the world as it might be if current trends are continued – settings in which characters must fight for personal survival and social change. As Short et al. (2014) put it, this is 'a dark future world of dehumanization and fear' where characters are forced to adjust, adapt and 'become new people' (p. 133) – experiences often shared by adolescents. And yet despite the commitment to social justice this implies, some critics point to tensions in YA dystopias between conservative and progressive ideologies. For instance, drawing on Foucault's notion of the gaze as a disciplinary mechanism and de Certeau's discussion of resistance tactics, For Connors, enabling such connections with lived reality encourages agency in working for social change and counters the influences of conservative undertones in some dystopian texts (2017). For example, (YA dystopian fiction etc.) YA dystopian fiction focuses on the control of citizens, especially teenagers, in such a way that the issue of power becomes the central concern of the genre, which explores the ways that institutions both repress and enable teenagers. At the same time, Connors questions the effectiveness of dire warnings in provoking genuine action from readers to work towards better outcomes for their shared worlds. This is in part due to instances in which dystopian worlds resemble echoes of the past rather than warnings of the future. YA fantasy writer and blogger Rhiannon Thomas has remarked that while some dystopias for adolescents are 'excellent, thought-provoking stories, many of them have dangerous messages and old-fashioned, bigoted stereotypes wrapped up in dystopian packaging' (2012, as cited in Connors, 2017, p. 3). Gruner (2019) develops the idea that fiction based on fantasy can be conservative, if not reactionary, 'as the alternative worlds proposed so often return to imagined pasts in which traditional hierarchies of, especially, gender and race, still hold sway' (p. 147). The argument thus posits that the presence of undertones of the past in fantasy or futuristic texts risks relegating core messages about oppression to the past also, rather than enforcing the idea that these are potential futures if change does not occur now.

In *Hive*, there are hints that the social controls in place are believed to be for the good of all, even though understanding of why they are so has been lost. The world is constructed on tropes the contemporary reader might associate with a conservative cult in which religion is reductive and a mechanism for control: the community upholds belief in an omniscient male God who nurtures the faithful through the Source, a 'gift which filtered down from heaven' (Betts, 2018, p. 20), and faithfulness to this entity is monitored by a hierarchical, albeit seemingly benevolent, leadership. Archaic-sounding aphorisms describe these relationships, and are reminiscent of similar terms in other dystopian texts. For example, when the citizens of *Hive* excuse the unexplainable with 'God works in mysterious ways' (p. 129), the reader's mind might be drawn to 'Under His eye', the catchphrase from *The Handmaid's Tale* popularised in the television series of the same name. Citizens are indoctrinated into a particular cultural world-view through social stories that blend traditional Western nursey rhymes and fairy tales that will be familiar to many readers, while the origins of these stories, and other elements of language, are lost. The community is constrained by rules which have been disconnected from their intentions, and the majority are informed about events and changes on a need-to-know basis and thus rendered even more childlike in their awareness of their world and their capacity to enact agency. Hayley is warned by the Son that 'no-one can know' (Betts, 2018, p. 77) about the aberrations she has witnessed – that is, that her complicity in silence and secrecy is for the good of the world and the implied safety of its citizens, the plants and the bees. Hayley says that 'If no-one believed in heaven, there'd be chaos' (p. 199), and chaos, we are told, 'is what happens with terror and desperation. Chaos changes everything' (p. 78). Conformity to a form of corporate messaging is thus presented as a social responsibility.

Love, marriage and procreation form another aspect of this society that is divorced from affective purposes and rendered functional to maintain a balanced, sustainable and healthy population, free from birth defects that might arise where the 'important rules for marriage' (Betts, 2018, p. 63) are not observed. We learn that marriage is determined by age and rank, and constrained to just three days, presumably for conception to occur in. Hayley tells us that 'we all wanted to take our turn with the gold ring and the white dress that had been worn by every girl since the

first days …' (p. 86). Yet Hayley cannot muster the enthusiasm of her peers. To her, marriage promises the opportunity to be alone with the boy she's chosen because he too has seen strange things for which he had no explanation – mysteries – so that for 'three nights … even God [would block] his ears' and she'd be able to 'share with [Luka] all the horrible, bloody secrets to which he'd listen without judgement' (p. 170). Hayley's refusal to accept limitations on what she can know puts her on a journey towards individuation that cannot be reversed, an outcome that Jaques (2014) claims is 'an ontologically unstable state', inherent in childhood itself, 'perpetually moving, a forward-focused period "en route" to a fully humanized adulthood, and simultaneously a static – if romanticized time (often in the past) – with a power of its own that defies many of the limitations inscribed by "being human"' (p. 9).

Hayley is discovering a greater capacity to be *more than* she had so far believed was possible, but how likely are her courage and commitment to truth to inspire in young readers confidence in *their* agency and commitment to change? In *Hive*, conservative ideologies around sex, gender and marriage, as well as freedom of expression and truth-seeking – ironically associated with the future – are enfolded within historical tropes of a bygone era. In *Rogue,* we learn that the real world is far bigger and more complex than Hayley's, and the backstory to *Hive* is explained. There is some suggestion that human experiences are more diverse, but society is still rigidly structured on class and racial lines, and sex and gender binaries at least are portrayed as normalised, such as when Hayley reflects that 'Love was a boy and a girl' (Betts, 2019, p. 287). Perhaps some of these conservative representations are designed to foreshadow a future society in distress, but in the English classroom, the impacts of this novel's world-building could be debated against Connors's (2017) assertion that dystopian texts both enable and constrain drivers for change. Extending this questioning, the next section examines ways in which social and political advances can be erased through world-building that locates social struggles in the past, potentially risking individual and social freedoms.

Personal and analytical questions
- In what ways is Hayley's world familiar, and unfamiliar?
- Is *Hive* more than a gripping story? How 'real' and relevant do the oppressions Hayley experiences feel today?

- What inspiration can be drawn from the decisions Hayley makes and the actions she takes to live with authenticity?

The erasure of institutional and historical oppression
Dystopian fictions are often viewed as warnings of inevitable and often disastrous consequences if the ills of the world go unchecked, and yet, as we have seen in the previous section, they may also 'inadvertently mirror and re-inscribe inequities in the present that they intend to challenge' (Peterman & Skrlac Lo, 2022, p. 301). This section explores how this can occur from a different, though related, narrative aspect: that is, when the erasure of difference in imagined futures relegates the social and political struggles of marginalised subjects to the past, thus inscribing the idea that struggles for justice have been wholly successful and diminishing the urge to maintain social gains and strive for greater equity. Authorial intention may rest on the belief that not referring to difference is one way of eliminating discrimination, but reading beyond what *is not named* may bring to light ways in which the text reinscribes discrimination. For instance, Ruthven (2017) names silence around gender inequality as a feature of postfeminism which asserts that the goals of the feminist project have been achieved; similarly, Blackburn and Buckley (2005) suggest that erasure of sexual difference reveals how 'heterosexuality is assumed, and homosexuality and bisexuality are often ignored' (p. 204). Further, even where a narrative may aim to suggest that discrimination has been eliminated, the absence of any explanation for how this has occurred risks trivialising the experiences of adolescents who experience prejudice in their lives today (Couzelis, 2013).

For these reasons, for several decades representation of diverse identities in YA literatures has been seen as important both for validating experiences of marginalisation (Booth & Narayan, 2018) and for critiquing entrenched ways of living as social communities. For instance, Hourihan (2014,) says that 'If Western society is to become less violent, less destructive of nature, more genuinely equitable, we need to tell different stories, especially to children' (p. 4). To Hourihan (1997), the hero/heroine of a story is often its most important barometer of diversity, not only in terms of individual subjectivities but also in terms of how the hero/heroine functions to provide examples of alternative ways of responding to situations. Too often in traditional narratives the

hero asserts the superiority of the white male, exerting strength over weakness and privileging winning at all costs (Hourihan, 1997). Contemporary YA dystopias often disrupt this narrative: heroes may be other than white or male; strength may be located in powers that are not physical; solutions may be found in collective rather than individual action. And while simply changing a prominent feature of the hero, such as their gender, may not in itself overturn forces of oppression (Little & Moruzi, 2015), reflection on storylines with diverse representations might bring to light possible solutions to contemporary moral, social and environmental dilemmas that are bigger than the personal outcomes for the story's hero.

Clearly diversity is seen to support the function of YA literatures to inspire political action in adolescents (Morton & Lounsbury, 2015). Drawing on research into the affective experience of reading, Morton and Lounsbury (2015) claim that while empathy is important, identification with a character is more likely to increase empathy, and 'predispose individuals to respond to future calls for activism' (p. 54). Thus, a lack of diverse representation, which can incorporate erasure of institutional or historical oppressions, can undermine affective connection between the fate of characters in literature and one's own life, by removing the characteristics and experiences readers may long to see represented in their texts.

This dilemma is pertinent to reading *Hive*. The world presented in this futuristic novel is undeniably homogenous, with seemingly little awareness of race, culture, and ethnicity, and no understanding that its cultural expressions are singular. On two occasions the reader glimpses fleeting acknowledgments of social difference. The first is when Luka tells Hayley that a man was once fished up through the hub, caught in the netter's catch, and that he was strange – in a drawing of the event the man was 'coloured in wrong … he was brown' (Betts, 2018, p. 143). The second is when Hayley discovers hidden archives and papers, and encounters further relics of Western culture such as picture books telling stories she knows – 'the golden-locked girl who'd been fussy with her porridge' (p. 228). The reader might thus wonder at what point in history Hayley's world became closed off from the wider one, because there is no evidence in it of even modest gains towards multiculturalism and recognition of First Nations cultures and histories, aspects of Australian society often achieved through struggle. Couzelis (2013) remarks that where 'the future lacks any racial

differences … what that really means is that the Anglo race, whiteness, is the race *selected*' (p. 132). To a sense of innocence about race can be added silence around issues of sexual and gender diversity, as discussed previously, that reinforces heteronormativity. For example, while Hayley comes to question many tenets of her world, she is silent on the matter of sexuality. She tells us that 'Every girl wanted marriage. Except me' (Betts, 2018, p. 168), but her contrary desires are related only to the isolation she feels and the heavy burden of knowing truths her friends do not. Hayley doesn't want marriage; she wants 'to forget' (p. 168). The novel misses, therefore, the opportunity to question the ways in which marriage includes some citizens and excludes others based on individual difference. Of course, *Hive* plays out in a vacuum, away from the wider world. *Rogue* (2019) takes the reader to a higher hill from which the bigger picture is clearer, providing some context for the setting in *Hive*. But it is not clear in *Rogue* if that context is offered as explanation, or as judgement. For instance, in this sequel we learn that the hive's founders were selected to take refuge in the 'doomsday vault' to protect seeds and people from a feared ecological catastrophe more than a hundred years earlier, in 2020. But there is no explanation for the racial and sexual homogeneity of the 'chosen' at that point in Australia's history. Furthermore, the hive is repeatedly referred to by Hayley in fond terms, through warm reminiscences of a harmonious if naive society. In the wider world, too, Hayley's growing awareness of racial difference is limited to seemingly innocent observations of various physical features – brown skin, almond eyes, tapered eyes – again, presumably to relegate to the past the racism that would have pervaded Australian society at the time when Hayley's ancestors descended to the hive. *Rogue* does attempt to signal ongoing social stratification: post-apocalyptic refugees – the drifters – are forced to sacrifice fertility to gain permanent residence on a patrolled island while the elites live in cities on the mainland. But the details of these realities sit somewhat vaguely to the side of the main plot. Finally, it is important to remember that the questions triggered here are unavailable if reading is based on *Hive* alone.

This is where this second theme interweaves with the first. By setting a futuristic story within an archaic world with conservative values, *without clearly challenging these views*, *Hive* conforms to post-racial and post-feminist notions that tensions in response to social oppression are almost old-fashioned, quaint

and not relevant to the modern world. Couzelis (2013) warns that this kind of futuristic vision 'fails to address alterity' (p. 133) in the real world that adolescent readers live in. In this way, texts avoid 'wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve their culture' (Couzelis, 2013, p. 141). English teaching is usually most effective when it supports students to see in texts threads that speak to their own lives. Peterman and Skrlac Lo (2022), for instance, encourage readings of YA dystopian texts that locate sites of oppression, and create opportunities to 'play, resist, transgress … and to imagine more expansive, humanizing futures' (p. 302). A study of *Hive* could therefore involve close inspection of the gaps, silences and blind spots in Hayley's world.

The final theme to be explored concerns tensions in ideologies that underpin individual versus collective success in YA literatures.

Personal and analytical questions
- Where are the markers of difference in the novel?
- What is achieved by the absence of difference?
- Are we meant to view Hayley's world as successful? How has it achieved success?

The exceptional hero/heroine reinforces meritocratic neoliberalism
Morton and Lounsbury (2015) claim that dystopian YA fiction can be spaces where young adults 'learn patterns of thinking and action to help them actively negotiate the political world' (pp. 54–57) but that critics are divided on the genre's potential to inspire action, and whether inspiration is more likely to result if the solution to oppression rests on the shoulders of an exceptional individual, or the products of collective action. They argue that many high-profile texts and series, including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent* and *The Maze Runner*, feature protagonists who embrace the power to act – 'traits of youth most suppressed in contemporary society' (Morton & Lounsbury, 2015, p. 65), but that in all of these examples, the characters are exceptional individuals. Morton and Lounsbury (2015) thus question the dulling impact this might have on readers, leaving them feeling powerless by comparison, alongside other nullifying effects such as the satiety factor – do YA readers experience political agency vicariously in their reading, and are thus sated as a result?

Connors (2021) similarly observes that in many YA dystopias an exceptional individual leads the fight against an oppressive and corrupt social system, and through their own exceptional powers brings about positive change, suggesting that individuals rather than communities or institutions are best positioned to work for justice. This aligns with neoliberalism's 'emphasis on individual freedom and its insistence that people take responsibility for their situation in life' by embracing competition and individualism, a system that 'distinguishes between "winners" and "losers", as opposed to one that aims to uplift all children' (Connors, 2021, p. 86). For YA literature to perform the function of inspiring action, it needs to instil in teenage readers, by whatever means, a sense that they too can achieve what their heroes and heroines can. Thus, whether through strong identification with one individual or the example of collective action, readers need to glean from texts both greater understanding of structural oppression and the inspiration to commit to working for social justice.

Hive provides a unique example of teenage response and action because the nature and motivation of the controlling forces that work against Hayley's search for truth are not obvious. Is Hayley working against oppression, or ignorance? And does the answer to this question make any difference to the lived realities of citizens? Hayley is exceptional, but her power lies not in physical strength or particular skill, but in her commitment to truth – to seeing her world for what it really is, regardless of the outcomes: 'I no longer wanted to forget, not even the bad things. … I didn't want to lose … my new knowledge … I didn't want to lose myself' (Betts, 2018, p. 202). Hayley accepts that her quest is a personal burden, but she persists in recruiting an ally, and in doing so resists individualism. Hayley communicates with Celia through a secret sign language of their own invention. She seeks out Luka and the Son, whom she believes have also had their eyes 'opened'; with her they share experiences beyond what is prescribed in 'the whole world' (Betts, 2018). In these fellow knowledge-bearers Hayley 'recognised a shared sensibility' (Betts, 2018, p. 141).

And yet there are limits to the extent that these allies are willing or able to go to expose their curiosity and possible 'madness'. It is only Hayley who is marked and punished for her transgressions. The Son suffers in secret and is an active agent; he rescues Hayley – there is no reason to expect that she would have freed herself – and yet, when the precipice of escape is before him, he holds back, ostensibly from a sense of responsibility to others. Thus, Hayley ultimately leaves

the world and ventures into the unknown on her own. She is the figure who gets *out*, and that separation from her peers instantly elevates her status; on the water, she reflects, 'I realised I already knew more than him [the Son]' (Betts, 2018, p. 256). Against Hayley's wishes, the conclusion thus conforms to the trope of the lonely, individual heroine, a move underscored by what Ruthven (2017) describes as postfeminist discourse that 'appears to ignore wilfully the ways in which the individual can mobilise the collective, preferring instead to privilege acting and speaking for individualistic purposes' (p. 50).

Some authors of YA fiction and critics of these genres turn to posthuman themes for alternative ways of reading human struggle, which invariably problematise individual achievement as a way to arrive at solutions to social problems. As Ruthven (2017) says, it is a 'posthuman gesture that privileges connectivities over isolation' (p. 55). And Gooding (2020) identifies surveys of YA dystopias that seemingly embrace the posthuman state and dismiss notions of exceptionalism as humanist illusions of control over nature. In her analysis of *Never Let Me Go* – a novel that, at its core, questions what it means to be human – Bowyer (2014) looks to the role played by the collective bonds shared by the teenage protagonists in the solutions to their oppression. Reading the experience of autonomy as relational, Bowyer (2014) says that 'Autonomy is not about an isolated individual directing her life in accordance with "rational", un-coerced self-interested preferences that are consistent with the way [the protagonist] views herself. Instead, an individual's autonomous actions are informed and motivated by her understanding of what is a fitting thing to do in her particular situation, as a responsible member of an empowering community' (p. 148). By this assessment, effective change can only come about when the individual acts authentically as a member of a community.

In *Rogue*, while we see Hayley both embracing the support of others and stubbornly forging her own path, in the end it is to community that she returns – not as a peer as she once was, but as someone with an individual purpose. Nevertheless, the limited knowledge gleaned through *Hive* alone could support conversations with adolescents about reading through uncertainty. Ostry (2013) says that 'young adult literature – like teenagers themselves – occupies an uneasy space between childhood and adulthood' (p. 109) and that adolescent readers can handle levels of despair commensurate with their maturity, without the assurance of a happy ending. Thus, like Hayley at the conclusion of *Hive* – 'It was darker than any night. Too dark to see myself. Was I even alive?' (Betts, 2018, p. 252) – teenage readers must work to *see* in the dark. Ideas raised in this section encourage questions about the responsibility, and efficacy, of individuals and collectives working for change, where *the outcomes are unknown*.

Personal and analytical questions

- Does the ending in *Hive* perpetuate male-dominated hero mythology by ignoring alternative solutions to conflict?
- Do the bonds developed between Hayley, the Son, Luka and Celia provide hope for alternative futures?
- How do Hayley's actions indicate a preference for shared struggle?
- From the clues available in *Hive*, is Hayley's world a utopian necessity that performed the function it was established to do, or an experiment in elite preservation?

Conclusion

This discussion has sought to bring an Australian text into the heart of scholarly discourses around YA dystopian fiction. Against key themes from this literature, *Hive*, a novel for young adolescent readers, has been interrogated, revealing aspects of the text that align with findings from this research and sites of resistance. This reading may encourage increased scholarly attention in Australian YA literature. It also may prove useful for designing culturally relevant curriculums in English classrooms in Australia, and in classrooms internationally where exemplars beyond larger literary and commercial markets are sought.

While *Hive* has been the primary source of inquiry, this discussion has also recognised its function within a duology that includes *Rogue*. Limitations arising through the study of only one of these books may be best understood through reflections on Hayley's handicap, which is that she cannot read. In Hayley's world ordinary citizens have been denied literacy – perhaps because it was unnecessary for existence, perhaps to maintain control by rendering citizens ignorant. Recall that the opening line of *Hive* is, 'We had no word for *ocean*. Why would we?' (Betts, 2018, p. 1). To know more – to understand why there is no word for ocean – one must *read on*. In *Rogue*, Hayley's inability to read is cause for further frustration when she cannot decipher the symbols of the Son's letter to

her. Reading these novels together brings the reader alongside Hayley on a journey of discovery as she attempts *to read* – to make meaning from unfamiliar and unsettling images and occurrences, and ultimately to find a way to reconcile her old world and the greater world that she must now embrace. This suggests an interesting provocation for teenage readers. What losses are inevitable when persistence is avoided, and what gains are at the end of sustained, deep reading? This discussion thus concludes with an invitation to teachers to include the whole duology – the 'real' whole world – in a unit of study, to enable the full benefits of reading to be realised

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Disquieting Texts

'Disquieting Texts and critical Literacy': An Investigation of Parents' and Community Members' Responses to *The island* by Armin Greder

Colleen Smit, Burcu Erkut and Paul Gardner, Curtin University

Abstract; Through the lenses of critical literacy, transactional theory and Narrative Empathy Theory, this small-scale study investigated parents' and community members' responses to Armin Greder's 'disquieting text' *The island*. Their views were elicited by means of a short questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews. While participants recognised the importance of critical literacy, our findings reveal paradoxical and often conflicting responses mediated by social attitudes and perceptions of both 'childhood innocence' and children's maturational readiness to process 'confronting' issues. These findings, which are applicable to educators in both primary and secondary schools, suggest that the use of socially and politically challenging texts in the classroom may require considerable teacher preparation, including prior discussion with parents to validate the efficacy of using 'disquieting' texts.

Key words: children's literature, picture books, critical literacy, parents, reader response

Introduction

The examination of social justice through literature provokes in-depth thinking about often unquestioned social perspectives, values and practices (Enriquez, 2014; Vasquez et al., 2019) while simultaneously allowing students to evaluate and challenge their personal values, beliefs and assumptions. The visual immediacy and succinct language of picture books (Whitelaw, 2017) provide intersemiotic (O'Halloran, 2008) spaces in which to explore inequities in power and encourage reflection on personal perspectives and 'taken-for-granted' social assumptions (Boutte, 2002, p. 147). Far from being the stuff of bedtime stories, picture books are now a genre comprising powerful texts that disrupt world views (Gustavson, 2000) and dominant discourses, reject master narratives, provoke pause and unsettle the preconceived expectations of the reader (Enriquez, 2014). Whitelaw (2017) refers to this body of children's literature as 'disquieting texts', adding that they convey an 'honesty' about the conflicts and complexity of the world, and invite readers into a space where they can ask questions and 'rethink' their understanding of what is 'true and ordinary' (p. 34). These texts challenge dominant ideology, homogeneous discourse and assumptions of the classroom as a politically neutral territory (Giroux, 1988). Such texts are adjuncts to critical literacy because they transparently challenge taken-for-granted hegemonic discourses and help students and teachers to critique otherwise 'hidden' injustices and oppressions, especially when studied alongside covertly biased texts.

For these reasons, some parents and wider society may find 'disquieting texts' uncomfortable and confronting (Cho, 2015; McDaniel, 2004; Mudiyanselage, 2021; Norris et al. 2012; Robertson & Hughes, 2012), which may problematise teachers' use of such texts. For example, for over 30 years certain parents' groups in the USA have challenged books that cover themes such as racism, sexism and homophobia, and texts that include characters from non-Christian or ethnic minority backgrounds (ALA, 2021). Literature provides readers with 'windows'

onto the world capable of enticing affective, cognitive and attitudinal responses. As McDonald (2013) notes, narratives can influence young people's beliefs, attitudes and re-imaginings of the world. For some parents, the prospect of children developing beliefs and attitudes different from their own may be challenging. However, as Dewey (1996) argues, one goal of education is the pursuit of social improvement. Ahlberg (2021) argues that in times of crisis – and few would doubt that we live in a time of crisis – literature focalises complex problems. She reminds us of the symbiotic relationship between reading, living and knowing the world and the combined power of texts and pedagogy to empower students as agents of social change.

In the hands of skilled teachers, students' responses to disquieting texts provide a means for dialogic interrogation of texts and students' responses to them, thereby creating a liminal pedagogic space for enhanced understanding of human behaviour and motives. However, this study, based on Greder's *The island* (2007), suggests that before using 'disquieting texts' teachers need to be aware of parents' concerns and provide plausible pedagogic explanations for the educative functions of such texts and how they will be used in the classroom. This study attempts to identify likely responses to disquieting texts so that teachers can pre-empt adversarial challenges by constructing a robust pedagogical rationale for their inclusion. Hence, its specific research questions were:

1. What perspectives do parents and community members bring to a disquieting text such as *The island* when making a judgement about its suitability for inclusion in the lower primary classroom?

2. Are these perspectives influenced by cultural background and ethnicity?

3. How might a knowledge and understanding of parents' and community members' perspectives of disquieting texts inform future teaching practices?

The island was specifically chosen because it is explicitly and unequivocally indicative of a thematically disquieting text: one that 'unsettles' the reader. The Australian Curriculum General Capabilities (ACARA, 2014) of critical and creative thinking and ethical understanding form a starting point for constructing a dialogic pedagogy that connects texts and students' personal perspectives (Rosenblatt, 1976), through critical reflection on the self and society. Disquieting texts require readers to not only comprehend the text but also evaluate their responses to depictions of social

injustice. Hence, the moral and social implications of human behaviour can be challenged beyond the world of the narrative (Evans, 2015).

Readers' interpretations of texts differ because each reader utilises their own fund of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006). The canon of appropriacy in children's literature is defined by adults and their conceptualisations of 'childhood'. While critical literacy has tended to be almost exclusively the preoccupation of academics, teachers (Enriquez, 2014) and pre-service teachers (Hughes & Roberston, 2011; Papola-Ellis, 2020; Robertson & Hughes, 2012), this study suggests that the marginalisation of different stakeholders is untenable and posits the need for inclusive discussions of the pedagogic functions of children's literature.

By means of a small-scale study, we elicited parents' and community members' views about the appropriacy of using *The island* with students. Although the study focused on parents of primary school-aged children, the findings and discussion are equally applicable to secondary teachers who want to develop critical literacy with their students. The discussion draws on three theoretical perspectives – transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1976), critical literacy (Janks, 2000, 2005, 2012, 2013; Luke, 2012) and Narrative Empathy Theory (Keen, 2006) – to address questions around the attitudes and beliefs of educational practitioners toward representations of injustice in children's literature compared with those of parents and the broader community. Also considered was the extent to which parent and community responses are mediated by individuals' life experiences. Finally, the impact of adult concepts of 'childhood' was considered as a contributory factor to parent and community views of what constitutes appropriate children's literature.

A brief review of *The island*

We are introduced to a man who has been swept onto a beach by rough seas. He is naked and vulnerable. We are told he is not like the islanders, which is the first stage of his 'othering'. The islanders are depicted as a masculine conglomerate of burly, pitchfork-wielding men. They are wide-eyed and fearful. A fisherman dissuades the islanders from forcing the man back to the sea on his flimsy raft. Instead, he is put inside an isolated goat pen, and life returns to normal until he re-emerges looking for food, which causes panic. Again, the fisherman advocates on his behalf and he is taken back to the pen with food scraps.

The man 'haunts' the islanders' dreams, and is demonised as a savage and a murderer who scares children. Fear incites action, culminating in him being put back out to sea. We are left to guess his fate, but the fisherman has already told us that the sea is treacherous. The fisherman's boat is burned and a huge grey wall is built around the island. In an ultimate act of isolationism, sea birds are killed so that no one at sea will know they are close to land.

Hope is sparse on the page, and it might be argued that the predominantly male islanders are stereotypes of macho aggression and nationalism. The naked man has no psychological depth; he does not even have a name or any 'glimmer' of agency. Yet *The island* is a powerful text for precisely these reasons. Its concise depiction of the process of scapegoating as one of 'othering', and the collective psychosocial demonisation of the 'outsider', makes it is highly relevant to the increasing numbers of displaced people fleeing poverty, hunger, war and persecution in search of sanctuary. It incites subtextual questions about why displacement occurs and how we respond to displaced people. Invariably, it incites emotional responses which may cause teachers to avoid using it, seeing it as 'too sensitive'. But this is precisely the purpose of disquieting texts: to elicit emotional responses to real-world problems. Instead of seeing this as negative, we can reframe emotional responses through a pedagogic lens.

Children who are encouraged by their parents to express their emotions and who receive sensitive responses are strongly inclined to develop positive prosocial behaviours, including sympathy and empathy (Spinrad & Gal, 2018). The classroom should be a psychologically safe and secure environment in which to explore emotions, providing there is sensitive dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2018, 2020). One such pedagogic strategy afforded by *The island* is through the character of the fisherman, who provides a textual gap in which to explore the hypothesis of hope. We might ask, what if the fisherman had been more eloquent, more persuasive, more linguistically adept in arguing for social justice? By positioning students as the fishermen and investigating powerful language to argue for social good and justice, it is possible to empower students as agents of positive change. In so doing, we may strengthen their emotional tenacity and ability to deal with the confronting issues they will inevitably encounter via televisual media and life experience.

Critical literacy and disquieting picture books

Discussion of disquieting picture books is framed by critical meta-theory incorporating cultural constructionism and sociocultural theory, applied to an analysis of societal norms, moral codes, particular worldviews, values and assumptions present in them (Dudek, 2018; Enriquez, 2014; O'Neil, 2010). Cultural constructionist perspectives posit that an individual's thoughts, experiences, feelings and expressions are primarily influenced by their culture (Lyon, 1995). These theories entwine to create a paradigm in which reading is a transactional act involving the reader's cultural values and prior knowledge, and assumptions present in the text (Enriquez, 2014). This may mean the ideological perspectives of socially 'privileged' readers are affirmed by the text but that it also confronts 'marginalised' readers with 'unjust' or misconceived depictions of their known realities (Enriquez, 2014). Sociopolitical theory expands Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1976) by considering the political, social and moral implications found in texts (Perry, 2012). Cunningham et al. (2013) cite Paulo Freire's (1996) concept of 'conscientisation': that is, a heightened state of social consciousness achieved through critical awareness of how power underpins language. 'Conscientisation' invites new ways of thinking (Lee, 2016; McDaniel, 2004) and new ways of using language to redesign the future (Janks, 2000), and encourages discussion of social justice. This paradigm invariably requires a reevaluation of children's 'political' capacities to critique social injustice and rejects discourses that require an acceptance of and submission to 'authority' (Mickenberg, 2011). The process of deconstructing and interpreting the power structures represented in children's literature is, therefore, a political act which repositions the reader as a 'co-author' and agent of change (Perry, 2012).

Given the sometimes deliberate dissemination of falsehoods by politically motivated organisations and individuals and blurring of demarcations between fiction and reality, the ability to discern what is true is, 'the most pressing cultural mission of our age' (D'Ancona, 2017, p. 114). Critical literacy, then, is an essential element of being fully literate in the twenty-first century, as it develops the reader's ability to analyse the dominant ideologies in texts (Cho, 2015). Vasqez et al. (2019) identify nine features of critical literacy, which are:

- the acquisition of a critical lens, or perspective, by which to read the semiotic systems through which the social world is both constructed and depicted;
- the recognition that texts are always socially constructed, value-laden, and represent particular perspectives;
- the development of understanding that culture informs individual and groups experience the world and that different cultural knowledge(s) need to inform curriculum content and development;
- the recognition that students' learning is enhanced when issues that are relevant to their lives are part of classroom content;
- the questioning of our own positioning in relation to texts, alongside recognition that we can both learn from the text, as well as critique it;
- the development of understanding of the socio-political inequities of 'race', class, gender, able-ism etc., and ability to critique them;
- the development of an ethic of ameliorative action to transform unequal social relations toward equity;
- the creation of texts with real-life social purposes in order to get-things-done; and
- the design of texts to create socially just views of the world.

The task for teachers is create safe pedagogic spaces that afford opportunities for enhanced social consciousness, critical analysis of everyday discourse (McDaniel, 2004), new ways of seeing and being in the world (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013; Zapata et al., 2017), and the cultivation of emotional resilience (Vogt et al., 2016; Zapata et al., 2017) and empathy (Vogt et al., 2016).

Mudiyanselage's (2021) suggestion that Narrative Empathy Theory provides an analytical framework for evaluating migrant-themed picture books is especially relevant to *The island*. It recognises authors' intentional use of multimodal devices to position readers from the viewpoint of the writer, thereby influencing how they perceive and understand the world (Janks, 2005). Central to narrative empathy are the attributes of character, especially the protagonist's, expressed through temperament, attitudes and behaviour, which make them humanlike (Keen, 2011) and their lives comparable to readers' own lives (Youngs & Loyd, 2020). The theory resonates with transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1976) given that the emotional appeal of narrative is influenced by the cultural and experiential background of the reader (Keen, 2011). A synthesis of Narrative Empathy Theory, transactional theory and critical literacy provides us with a theoretical framework for understanding how readers might actively construct meaning and activate reflective thought.

This synthesis of theory is particularly applicable to the intersemiotic 'play' of visual and linguistic elements in postmodern picture books that position the reader as the primary meaning maker (Whitelaw, 2017). Their disruption of taken-for-granted assumptions provides 'varied and particular epistemic possibilities' (Whitelaw, 2017, p. 33) that offer the reader new ways of being and acting in the world (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013; O'Neil, 2010). Through its analytical lens, critical literacy incites constructive social change (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013) by means of collaborative action (Cunningham et al., 2013; Dudek, 2018; O'Neil, 2010). In *The island*, the fisherman is a conduit through which teachers can explore 'what-if' possibilities for the just treatment of the migrant. What if the fisherman had been more eloquent; what if his command of rhetorical devices had enabled him to be more persuasive in trying to save the man's life?

Teachers views of 'disquieting' picture books

The power of texts to transform the reader through critical analysis, personal reflection and collaborative discussion is comprehensively documented across the literature. However, discussion of controversial and ethical issues, cultural and political constraints and teachers' personal attitudes is noticeably sparse. Conversely, there is coverage of teaching for social justice, underpinned by anthropological, sociopsychological and critical multicultural theoretical frameworks (Brandes and Kelly, 2001; Evans et al., 1999; Kelly & Brooks, 2009). Kelly & Brooks (2009) problematise 'childhood innocence' as a 'powerful myth' (p. 214) which constrains teachers' exploration of forms of oppression with young students. They suggest that rather than restricting the choice of topics, the focus should be on how they are approached.

Zapata et al. (2017) advise that pedagogic approaches must capture readers' emotional responses to the sociopolitical messages in texts, and Vogt et. al. (2016) add the need for reflective thought around 'tensions' in texts and the assumptions readers bring to their reading as a basis for questioning how they might be complicit in perpetuating existing prejudice or injustice. However, missing from the literature are suggested methods of supporting students in these

'vulnerable moments' as they experience emotional responses to texts.

Investigations of parents' perspectives regarding sociopolitical issues in schools is sparse, although two Australian studies report the views of parents of K–12 LGBTQ students. Parents were critical of the lack of inclusivity of their children's identities in both the 'overt' and 'hidden' curriculums and advocated for greater transparency regarding oppressive practices, along with explicit teaching and proactive school practices designed to challenge social prejudice and violence towards members of the LGBTQ community (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2021; Ullman & Ferfolja, 2016).

The literature suggests the need for further investigation of parental responses to issues raised by disquieting picture books and their use with different age groups. For parents of young children, the question that needs to be asked is: how young is too young to approach sensitive topics in literature? This study might be considered a 'threshold investigation' that seeks to begin to address that question.

Method

In order to investigate parents' and community members' views on the critical exploration of social justice issues in the primary age phase, and how they perceived and responded to *The island* as a specific example of a disquieting text, researchers adopted an interpretivist approach. Although an initial short survey was used, its design was informed by the intention to capture insights into the unique complexities of multiple perspectives. Both the survey and subsequent interviews sought to elicit data to illumine the subtleties of each case and produce culturally and socially specific behavioural knowledge (Cohen et al., 2018). Interviews were conducted in a 'neutral' setting chosen by each participant.

Sample

The investigation involved six parents of pre-primary to Year Two children attending three different schools, plus four people from the wider community. The participants came from two moderately affluent suburbs of Perth, Western Australia. Selection was by means of convenience sampling, but participants were not known to the researchers prior to the study. The sample was also cross-generational, with the parents ranging between the ages of 28 and 42, while the community participants covered a wider age range, from 22 to 65. One parent was also a teacher. Seven

of the participants were born in Australia. The three who had migrated to Australia came from the USA, the Middle East and India.

Ethics

Each participant received an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and gave permission for data to be recorded and reported.

Research design

Participants were given copies of *The island* to read several days before completing the survey and the follow-up interview. The survey was completed immediately before the interviews. All ten participants were interviewed, but two did not complete the initial survey. Of the eight participants who completed the survey, seven did so independently. Due to a written language barrier the responses of one participant were transcribed by a researcher.

A semi-structured interview schedule informed both by Narrative Empathy Theory (Keen, 2006) and each participant's survey answers enabled the two interviewers to delve deeply into the participants' views, collecting detailed narrative and personal interpretations of the text through informal critical discussion. The one-to-one interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and were conducted face-to-face in a neutral location. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and annotated for comparative analysis alongside findings from literature in the field. Pervasive patterns in participants' responses were identified and mapped. Pairing of survey and interview data was conducted to illuminate the 'close-up reality' of the values, biases and world views held by the participants; these comparisons also provided methodological triangulation to demonstrate the concurrent validity of findings (Cohen et al., 2018).

The use of the survey and follow-up interviews proved effective as a means of capturing different interests, experiences and cultural forms (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 324), as well as the complexities of participants' thinking over time (albeit a relatively short time). A single method might have elicited only static ideas at a specific point in time.

Limitations of the study

Although the sample was mixed-gender and intergenerational, and included both people born in Australia and migrants to Australia, it was restricted in terms of size and socioeconomic and cultural

representation. Access to a wider sample was also impaired due to COVID-19 pandemic protocols. Future studies could be enhanced by means of a larger sample and the inclusion of working-class parents, Aboriginal/Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander parents, and parents who are recent migrants to Australia. Member checking of interview transcripts might also elicit more data, given that it would allow adults time to reflect on their responses. In addition, future studies might include several texts ranked on a continuum from 'mildly disquieting' to 'extremely disquieting' in order to gauge diverse reactions. It is acknowledged the theme and conclusion of *The island* might make it an 'extremely disquieting' text, which is a factor to consider when reviewing responses in this study.

Findings: Participants' responses to *The island*

Survey data revealed sometimes conflicting and paradoxical responses to *The island*. All of the participants agreed that children should be encouraged to question their own beliefs and attitudes, and the dominant ideology of society, as well as being taught the values of kindness and fairness. The potential for guided discussion around issues of compassion, multiculturalism and acceptance were also mentioned.

However, half of the participants also said that children are largely incapable of forming reasoned political judgements. There was mild to strong agreement that '*childhood innocence*' should be protected. However, subsequent interviews revealed multilayered and unstable beliefs. Responses were mediated by considerations such as a child's age, environment and emotional and cognitive capacity to deal with sensitive issues. Two participants acknowledged that children live in the '*same brutal*' world as adults but hesitated about giving children material they had '*no control over*'. One parent defined childhood innocence as a stubborn unconsciousness, or unawareness, of the harshness perpetuated in the world. Other participants noted that innocence can only be protected for as long as the environment or the child's own curiosity allows.

Six participants thought the text more suitable for '*marginalised*' children and those subject to prejudice than for '*Australian born*' children, and three said it was not suitable for pre-adolescent students. The surveys revealed that adults' perceptions of childhood were problematic, and that childhood could not be over-generalised. Ultimately, eight out of ten participants said that while they would not introduce *The island* to their children, they would not deter their child from

reading it if they showed interest in doing so.

While recognising the potential for guided discussion around issues of compassion, multiculturalism and acceptance, four participants thought the text explored subjects beyond the comprehension of readers below Year 3. Three then went on to say that it was not developmentally appropriate for pre-adolescent students, and one of these went even further, stating it was not suitable for students below Year 10. However, four others considered *The island* moderately to highly relevant to the average Australian Year 1 or 2 classroom, but only one of these participants thought the text specifically suitable for Year 1 readers.

Participants generally found *The island* '*uncomfortable*' to read, with one participant, a parent and teacher, describing the book as '*horrifying*'. First impressions of a book are often influenced by its paratextual features such as title, font size, shape and colour (Thomson, 2011); responding to the dark tones of the fortress on the cover, participants said it was '*ominous*', '*dark*' and '*scary*'. One participant summarised the paratextual foreboding by saying, '*You just know that the book isn't going to be about good things*'.

One participant's responses were clearly mediated by their personal experience of migration to Australia. They commented, '*people had different mindsets of seeing a brown individual … I always sensed that I was viewed differently*'. Throughout the interview the participant referred to '*compassion*' as imperative for social good and societal progress, saying, '*if no one in society wants to be compassionate, then society is not going to change*'. These responses align with Keen's (2006) suggestion that empathetic connections between readers and characters do not exist solely in the text, but are in response to the reader's life experiences (Rosenblatt, 1976).

Participants born in Australia also demonstrated a degree of 'empathic unsettlement' with the text. However, they gave more muted responses, perhaps because they had no direct personal experience with which to engage with the characters. These participants might be described as 'secondary witnesses' (Keen, 2006, p. 218). For example, one participant said she felt '*sorry*' for the stranger because of his '*desperation*'. She recognised that Greder had '*put into print the ugly and bad side of society*', but she also seemed emotionally detached, adding that she had witnessed people being marginalised but did not see how '*refugees see things … its hard to make a judgement*'.

What separated these two readers was the 'intertextual

knowledge' they could bring to the text. One was able to fill in the gaps left by Greder's 'nameless, faceless' protagonist, while the other seemed to 'slide over' the author's thematic intention, saying, '*the author has put this character in a book that has no personality, it's just not like that in real life*'. This response overlooks several genres of children's literature, such as fairy stories, folktales and fables, that employ one-dimensional protagonists. From this perspective, we might read *The island* as a modern fable about 'scapegoating', 'othering' and 'marginalisation'. This participant acknowledged the cruelty inherent in the text, but stated that '*in a modern-day world, you wouldn't actually persecute someone like this*'. The treatment of refugees in detention centres around the world appeared absent from her knowledge of current affairs.

Unfortunately, in the 'modern world' this kind of persecution does exist, and it exists in so-called 'advanced' societies. Currently, there are 100 million people, the highest number on record, who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict and persecution (UNHCR, 2022). These people are vulnerable to further persecution. For example, census data reveals that of the 5,000 children trafficked into Britain in 2021, the majority were subjected to either criminal or sexual exploitation (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Furthermore, according to Rights Tracker (HMRI, 2022), significant numbers of people in the UK are not able to exercise either civil liberties or political freedom. The country scores only 5.7 out of 10 for its record on safeguarding people from torture – as does Australia.

Overall, participants agreed that it would require a knowledgeable teacher with experiences and specific training to teach picture books like *The island*. There was general agreement that children should be exposed to a variety of ideologies and world views, but that teachers needed to employ other pedagogic work as well if students were to be empathically engaged.

Discussion

The desire to protect children's innocence as a natural and all-encompassing phenomenon is strongly evident in this study. This suggests that across the sample group there were shared sociocultural values and beliefs (Laluddin, 2016). Evans et al. (1999) note that the rationale for including controversial topics in the classroom rests on the values and attitudes of ever-shifting cultural belief systems, which are often beset by fear of threats to the natural order. It is through

this sociocultural lens that one can understand the assumptions underpinning diverse interpretations of 'innocence', as well as the view that the critical exploration of confronting topics and freedom to enjoy the 'innocence of childhood' are mutually exclusive. Also important is the recognition that these views were mediated by environmental and cultural factors. Illustrative of this point, one participant compared the child '*whose mum drops them off in the Range Rover*' and the child of refugee parents, saying that for some children, '*some of [these] things are discussed around the dinner table already*'. Assumptions aside, the notion that socially privileged children's innocence should be protected while migrant children may have already experienced a harsher version of reality implies that the concept of 'childhood innocence' is perhaps a particularly ethnocentric one.

Allied to this view of 'innocence' was a perspective that young children are not able to deal with sensitive issues because of their limited cognitive, social and emotional development, which impedes their ability to make critical judgements. It is a view that is perhaps underpinned by Piaget's (1972) concept of 'readiness', which may have inadvertently restricted learning by implying the developmental suitability of certain types of learning for certain ages (Kelly & Brooks, 2009). Such thinking hinges on the assumption that the development of cognitive, social or emotional capacities is innate and beyond the control of the individual. It also suggests that young children have a limited capacity to analyse texts. However, it is possible that adults underestimate children's cognitive agility. In a comparative study of interpretations of the wordless picture book *Black and white* (Macauley, 1990), Panteleo (2006) found that while adults had difficulty comprehending it, children demonstrated adept comprehension of the text.

These assumptions succinctly demonstrate the paradoxical nature of participants' thinking. We might ask, how can texts be considered inappropriate on the grounds that their themes are considered to be beyond the cognitive, social and emotional capacities of the child while simultaneously recognising that the development of such capacities is contingent on exposure to the very themes explored in these texts?

Critical literacy in the primary school

Several key themes emerged from the study that have significant implications for critical literacy. Critical literacy incites critical reflection on one's place in

the world, challenges the status quo and harnesses collaborative action for social change (Cunningham et al., 2013; Enriquez, 2014; Mickenberg et al., 2011; O'Neil, 2010; Zapata et al., 2017). Some parents considered the text too pessimistic and confronting to be included in primary schools, but today's children are continually witnessing negative messages about the world and their own future on a planet in existential crisis. Educationalists might argue that texts like *The island* provide us with a focal point for discussing the reasons why some people behave the way they do towards others who are different, why people who lack power do not speak up for themselves and whether the man posed a real threat to the islanders or an imaginary one. In short, *The island* satisfies Woldeyes's (2017) first principle of human rights education, which involves the study of

> the very processes through which certain human beings are stripped of their agencies, objectified as things and classified as unworthy and sub-human. This critical exercise is crucial to understand the ways in which power operates through knowledge and institutions which objectify certain identities and marks them with its own codes and rules, with the ultimate goal of excluding them from the status of being human. (p. 16)

Once we work with students to explore how 'othering' dehumanises both the 'other' and ourselves, we can work to obviate this tendency. Before they can engage with disquieting texts like *The island*, however, teachers working with all age phases may need to undertake preliminary work with parents in order to create a common understanding of their intentions and the pedagogic value of critical literacy. To be in the world as truly human, we surely have to educate our children to adeptly use our single most powerful human asset – language – to construct ways of improving how we live alongside one another. Exploring literary texts through a critical lens provides a gateway to heightened social consciousness, the ability to re-examine one's worldview and a space where collaborative action (Cunningham & Enriquez, 2013; Zapata et al., 2017) can be scaffolded by the teacher. Texts that expose oppression, control and social injustice reveal ways of seeing the world from multiple perspectives and can lead to questions and interpretations that challenge dehumanising social discourses such as racism and misogyny. Disquieting texts like *The island* offer teachers an opportunity to construct a pedagogy of hope and empowerment.

A pedagogy of hope

In its recent survey, the UNHCR (2022) stated that the United Nations Refugee Agency found 78 per cent of people in 28 countries support the settlement of refugees fleeing conflict and persecution. While Greder adeptly maps out the process of othering in *The island* and shows how an individual can be dehumanised, he appears to create a dark text devoid of hope. Indeed, for the adults in this study, hopelessness was the text's dominant theme. If left unchallenged, it may cause children to become deeply sad, which is the last thing we want our children to be. However, responses to the book do not have to end with the last page, and readers do not have to passively accept the text's conclusion. This is the point at which Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt 1976) lends itself to critical literacy by positing the possibility of multiple interpretations.

Greder positions the reader empathically in relation to the man rather than the islanders. Not only is this an explicit example of Narrative Empathy Theory (Keen 2006), it offers teachers and students the opportunity to disrupt the book's dismal conclusion. By doing this, teachers can demonstrate to children that they have the power to change events. As stated above, the character of the fisherman provides us with a narrative 'gap' through which to challenge the islanders. We might say the fisherman represents the 78 per cent of people in the UNHCR survey. We know that he is not alone in his views, because Greder tells us that a minority of other islanders thought like he did but were cowed into silence. The pedagogic work needed here is to develop, through the fisherman, a counter-narrative using language as a powerful persuasive tool.

In Australia persuasive writing, along with narrative, is the dominant text type for national assessment purposes. *The island* provides teachers with a text that reflects real- world events. After studying how rhetorical devices work, children could be asked to become the 'voice' of the fisherman who sets out to persuade the islanders to be more caring towards the man. However, as this study shows, teachers will also need to utilise rhetorical devices to persuade their parents of the value of studying disquieting texts. It is possible that by demonstrating the pedagogic possibilities that challenge disquieting themes – ones that empower children through their use of language – teachers can gain the trust and support of parents. Disquieting picture books, then, invite critical reflection, challenge realities, expand ethical understandings and potentially facilitate the personal

evolution of the reader. This is especially so when they are read with the guidance of teachers who recognise their unique affordances to stimulate the cognitive and emotional capacities of reader and 'urge voyages' of discovery through co-constructed meaning-making (Whitelaw, 2017, p. 34).

Conclusion

Through an investigation of parents' and community members' responses to the picture book *The island* by Armin Greder (2007), this study sought to begin to 'plug a gap' in discussions of critical literacy. Adults outside education have been excluded from debates about the importance of critical literacy. Although these data reveal nuanced parental attitudes, values and beliefs, the majority of the study's participants cited the protection of 'childhood innocence' as a significant reason not to use the text with children in the lower primary phase of schooling. They also suggested that children had limited cognitive, social and emotional capacities which would inhibit their comprehension of confronting political themes. However, the findings also reveal some paradoxical and contradictory views. Although the parents valued the sustained innocence of children as a childhood right, though one mediated by the sociocultural contexts of the individual, they also recognised the value of exposure to the themes represented in *The island*. While these findings are not comprehensive and must be understood as being representative of a limited subset of one community situated within specific sociocultural and sociohistorical parameters, they do reveal hidden roadblocks for educators wanting to develop critical literacy.

While there is a need for further investigations with parents into the potential for using disquieting picture books to teach about social justice, parents also need to be recognised as significant stakeholders in their children's education. However, rather than being constrained by parental attitudes and misconceptions of children's capabilities, it is suggested teachers employ a 'pedagogy of hope' by using textual gaps that afford opportunities to empower children through the co-construction of alternative narratives – ones that use powerful language to advocate for positive change. In this way, children can learn how to be active agents in the world rather than passively accepting the negative behaviour of others. There is, however, a need to create resources and strategies linked to specific disquieting texts as a means of supporting teachers,

across all age phases, as they enter this difficult terrain.

Thus while there is a need for further investigations outside of academia to identify other ways in which to advocate for critical literacy, this study suggests educators can begin to extend education beyond the classroom and into the community. Articulating a 'pedagogy of hope' which involves students in positive explorations of their power to influence the world around them offers an opportunity for parents and community members to reimagine the capacities of young children to navigate the realities of the world they occupy.

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'What Truth Do You Choose to Acknowledge?' Kate Mulvany talks about adapting Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*

Demelza Hall and Amanda Moran, Guilford Young College, Tasmania

In 2022, English Faculty and Davis Centre staff at Guilford Young College (GYC) in Tasmania embarked upon an in-depth author study with award-winning Australian writer and actress, Kate Mulvany.[1] As the inaugural project of the Davis Centre's newly formed 'Research Branch' – an investigative hub developed by Dr Demelza Hall, Academic Research Leader at GYC and Adjunct Researcher at the University of Tasmania, with assistance from Dr Amanda Moran, then Davix Centre Assistant at GYC and Lecturer in Education at Deakin University – this interview grew out of an impetus to enhance research culture and scholarly practice within the school and create high-level critical resources to support pedagogies of decolonisation in the English classroom.[2] The interview questions posed to Mulvany were developed through intensive focus group discussion and ongoing consultation with GYC's English faculty.[3] Each of the questions were guided, explicitly, by the aim of assisting senior secondary students to undertake close textual analysis and develop their personal responses to Mulvany's *Jasper Jones* stage play adaptation (2016).

With its focus on social justice and exploration of Australian history, Craig Silvey's original novel, *Jasper Jones* (2009), has been a popular text choice nationally, with teachers setting it for senior English as well as years 9 and 10 English subjects. The prominence of Silvey's novel in Australian English curricula has been attested to in McLean Davies, Martin and Buzacott's (2021) study of the 'critical considerations' underpinning the teaching of Australia's national literature, in which they found Silvey's *Jasper Jones* to be the most popular set text among the secondary school English teachers they surveyed (p. 471). Silvey's *Jasper Jones* is a prominent text choice because it introduces topical social discourses in the English classroom – particularly discourses relating to Indigenous experiences and the ongoing issues stemming from Australia's colonial history, gender inequality, and migrant experiences – from the perspective of a young and seemingly relatable protagonist (Davies et al., 2021, p. 471). In Tasmania, however, it tends to be Mulvany's stage play adaptation that features as a core text, with at least seven schools setting it as their Module 3 text for 'Close Analysis' in the senior English subject, 'English 3'.

English 3 is one of the most widely studied senior English courses in Tasmania, as Anita Manners, Head of English at GYC, attests:

> Senior Secondary English courses in Tasmania are offered at various levels, the top of which are known as Level 3 courses and are selected by students who wish to pursue an academic pathway. There are three Level 3 courses, with each having either a traditional, contemporary, or creative writing focus. English 3 is the most popular and focuses on examining contemporary texts through theoretical frameworks such as 'Genre Studies' and 'Adaptation Studies'. Kate Mulvany's *Jasper Jones* falls into the 'Close Text Study' module, which requires students to undertake a close textual analysis, while also considering the various perspectives offered within the play. Through first-person reflective responses, students must convey how these perspectives and their own personal social and cultural contexts

influence their interpretation of the text (personal communication, 28 July 2023).

Like Silvey's hypotext, Mulvany's *Jasper Jones* is favoured by English 3 teachers because it introduces meaningful intercultural discourses in the English classroom, raising awareness about Aboriginal Australian experiences and initiating dialogues about the ongoing impact of Australia's colonial history. Mulvany's adaptation, however, is also popular due to the pedagogical benefits of its medium.

In the following interview, Mulvany states that: 'Plays are not books. They are road maps. They are meant to be activated. So I encourage you to always do the play that honour – read it aloud […] Embody it. Let it fill you. That's why it's a 'play'' **(cross-ref)**. When read aloud in class, Mulvany's stage adaptation not only gives voice to the plight of its young protagonists it also invites students, through enactment and guided discussion, to grapple personally with the many issues the characters experience; prompting the worlds of the characters and readers to 'collide and meld' (Mulvany, cross-ref). This conflation of the performative and the personal is reinforced via the formal assessment requirements for Module 3. The Office of the Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification (TASC) requires that students undertake a 'close analysis' of their Module 3 text which incorporates 'appropriate language and stylistic features to sustain a personal voice and point of view' (TASC 'English'). In developing their interpretation of their Module 3 text, students are encouraged to foreground their own contexts, to compose a first-person response that draws upon their experiences and world views. By reading Mulvany's stage play aloud *in conjunction with the interview*, students not only become thoroughly immersed in the narrative but are also exposed to the ways in which literary interpretation can, through author intervention, interweave modes of personal story and memoir.

TASC's emphasis on the development of a personal response aligns with calls for works of critical literary analysis to foreground reader subjectivity, especially when texts are composed by First Nations storytellers or engage closely with themes of Australian identity and belonging (Hall, 2021, 2022; Leane, 2022; Phillips & Archer-Leane, 2019). Mulvany's stage play is what Bacalja and Bliss (2019) would describe as a text by a non-Indigenous author 'which explores Indigeneity and settler-colonisation' (46). Hence, while Mulvany's

Jasper Jones is not 'Indigenous theatre' – a thriving artistic and cultural force within Australia that is renowned for 'shifting' contexts of 'national reflection' so that 'questions of accountability, reconciliation and decolonisation' are centralised (Thurow, 1) – it is, nonetheless, still theatre that activates audiences/readers to reflect/become personally invested in pedagogies of decolonisation. The popularity of Mulvany's text on the senior English curricula in Tasmania indicates the increasing pedagogical value placed on literary works that prompt discussions about the ongoing implications of Australia's violent colonial history and the need for nuanced discourses of intercultural exchange to be embedded in the classroom. There is a risk, however, of recolonisation if these issues are only explored from a settler-Australian perspective without, as Phillips and Archer-Lean suggest, 'context or reflection on the role of the reader' (24). While recognising that First Nations authors are hugely underrepresented on Australian English curricula (Bacalja and Bliss, 2019), this interview hopes to assist in processes of decolonisation by both modelling and promoting reading practices that foreground subjective grappling and the development of standpoint positions that encourage students to personally consider which 'truth' they 'choose to acknowledge.'

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Guilford Young College: Thank you for agreeing to answer our questions, Kate! When teaching *Jasper Jones* we have found that the ways in which 'truth' is shown to be subjective resonates quite strongly with our students, particularly those settler Australian students who, like the text's protagonist, Charlie, may not have considered how they are personally entangled in the ongoing story of colonisation. How important is it for Australian literary works to be engaged in these processes of truth-telling?

Kate Mulvany: I think that one of the main purposes of any art form is to search for truth. A large part of that in theatre is asking an audience member, 'Where do you belong in this story?' Theatre is not for people to just come and sit in rows and exist outside of the story. Theatre is inviting people *into* the narrative, the discussion, the truth of the play. Audiences bring their own minds, bodies, breaths, energies and experiences into the theatre, and that is an incredible way of exploring societal truths and lies. Yes, there's a story

happening onstage, but there are countless stories happening in the audience as well, and it's when these worlds collide and meld that the true potential of theatre comes to the fore. There is nothing more beautiful, confronting and thrilling than recognising your truth through performance, whether you are onstage or in the audience. During the productions of *Jasper Jones* around the world, there have been instances of people recognising their own truths via the array of characters in the play. Some of them were Charlies realising their role in the ongoing story of colonisation. Some were Jaspers, dealing with systemic bigotry, racism and cruelty. Some were Jeffreys, children of refugees trying to assimilate into hostile environments. Many were Mrs Bucktins – rebelling against what is 'expected' of them as mothers, as wives, as women. Some people simply said, 'I live in a town just like Corrigan, but I didn't realise it till today …' So many truths hidden under so many lies. But I hope that for every truth realised that causes pain or trauma, there is also action to make a change for the better.

GYC: When analysing your play students are asked to undertake close reading, to unpack your use of metaphor and symbolic language. Many students, for example, consider how, and to what end, elements of the natural world (such as fire and water) are used to evoke ideas around cultural growth and renewal in Australia. You have mentioned elsewhere that you enjoy working with metaphor. We were wondering if there are any metaphors, or symbolic moments, in the text that you would like to discuss further and see as having wider cultural significance?

KM: I love a good metaphor! Sometimes it's a far more interesting (or wily) way to make an audience member unpack an issue or an idea without spoonfeeding it to them.

That said, most of the metaphors in *Jasper Jones* – like water and fire – came straight from the head and heart of Craig Silvey. Luckily, they are metaphorical elements that also work beautifully onstage, so were great for the adaptation – water and fire and smoke and bush and sun-blasted country and moonlit nights can be used to incredible effect theatrically. My job as an adaptor and playwright is to not just think of my audience, but of my team of storytellers that will put this theatrical sensory jigsaw together. The director and cast play a huge part in the creation, but the set, lighting and sound designers are also vital

contributors and they lend abundant assistance to the formation of the story. I know the biggest gift I can give them in the adaptation are elements of metaphor that can be dramatically realised. In fact, that's the best thing about theatre – seeing the world take its shape around you and right in front of you, live onstage. So for me, the most important thing was making sure I chose the moments in Craig's text that were both metaphorically powerful and theatrically impactful.

For example, the slats of Charlie's sleep-out are – for me – one of the most important metaphors in the play, and one of the most theatrical elements. The fact that Charlie even *has* a sleep-out makes him a literal 'outside observer'. The removable slats give him the power to either peer out at the world, shutter himself in, or remove them completely and escape his own existence. Design-wise, they make for beautiful shadows in what is ultimately a whodunnit story … very noir. They can make Charlie look like he's in prison, they can make his father look suspicious, they can make his room look like a cocoon – all depending on the lighting, sound and blocking that accompany these moments. Subconsciously, that makes a huge impact on the audience's perspective of a scene. The slats serve many purposes and so for that reason, I use them a lot.

Another important element is the glade – a natural place of stillness, calm and beauty, watched over by an old, branched tree. The glade is the only place that Jasper can find sanctuary and peace. But his place is tarnished by intruders, by trauma and destruction. The glade then becomes a metaphor for Australia, and for our world.

Metaphors can take place in so many forms in this play. Through costume, such as Charlie's sandals versus Jasper's boots, through musical motifs, such as Normie Rowe's 'Que Sera Sera' (Normie was conscripted to the Vietnam War alongside … my Dad!), or through what we choose to burn to the ground … like the white-picketed Wishart house and all of its dreadful secrets.

GYC: Our students frequently analyse the space of the glade in their critical responses to the play but, as you suggest, those in-between, or interstitial, sites, such the sleep-out, are also so significant. Could you talk a bit more about the ways in which Jasper navigates and/or mediates these spaces in the play? Do you think he, like Charlie, functions as an agent of potential cultural change?

KM: As Craig Silvey so beautifully captures in the book, Corrigan is a town of many spaces and realms, from glades to town halls to cricket pitches to sleep-outs. But there is only one character who navigates the geography fully, and that is Jasper. To me, this is because it is his land. He is the eyes and ears of the town. Always watching. Ever present. Not in a spiritual way, though, although he has every right to have a connection to Country. But because he has to take care of himself, he has to keep himself safe. This is a dangerous place to live for a young boy who is considered 'trouble' in a town of horrific bigotry and ignorance. In a way, Jasper navigates the town so that he can truly know his enemy. At the end of the book, Jasper has been through an unexpected change, but the town – sadly – has not. And Jasper recognises that even though he has more right than anyone to be in this town, he has to leave it because it is a place of danger, corruption and injustice. Jasper doesn't have the time or patience to wait for Corrigan to change. That's not his purpose. That's the job of Corrigan to work out for itself. Whether it does or not, well … that's another story.

GYC: Your adaptation of *Jasper Jones* is taught widely as a senior English text in Tasmania, but we are one of the few states to have yet hosted it as a stage production. Hence, our students frequently have questions about the stage directions particularly the 'beats' and parallel narratives you deploy at timely moments throughout the play. Could you unpack the significance of these dramatic devices for us a bit more?

KM: I'll do my best!

Let's start with 'beats'. I think most writers have very different ideas of what a 'beat' means. It's often a very personal thing, and yet it is used a lot in scriptwriting. I use the beat as a kind of metaphorical breath, not just in the performance of the play, but for myself as an adaptor and writer. When I write a scene, I try to make it have a rhythm, a pulse, a drive … So the page becomes my manuscript and the words are my notes. And just like music, sometimes the space – or breath – between the notes is just as important as the note itself to let an idea hang in the air for a moment before the piece moves on. So a beat is normally placed at a moment in the play that I want the audience to sit in, briefly. I want them to pick up a breadcrumb that's been dropped. I want them to take a breath.

From a performance point of view, a beat can also be used for a character to make a shift. To go from dark to light, or light to dark. To change gears. My favourite way to use a beat is when a character does something totally unexpected. For example, when a comic character suddenly says something very serious that changes the trajectory of the scene, or the feel of the theatre. It's important there's a slight beat there for the audience to respond to the temperature shift. That said, every beat comes with a caveat! I put a great deal of trust in the actors onstage, so if a beat is tripping them up, or the scene plays better without it, then I'm not afraid to lose it. It is a suggestion. Not a law.

By parallel narratives, I'm assuming you mean the device that's often used while Charlie is narrating, in that we see another scene taking place in contrast to what we're being told. It was important to me that despite taking in our seemingly 'reliable' narrator, we also still see contradictions to his world view. What might seem true in Charlie's world is not always the reality of other characters. Charlie's narrative is endearing, but also naive, privileged and uneducated. So by showing multiple narratives alongside Charlie's, it hopefully asks the question of the audience, 'What truth do you choose to acknowledge?' It implicates us and makes us complicit. It makes us more active in the story, and therefore more invested (I hope) in where we sit within it.

GYC: We have a culturally diverse student cohort at GYC and teachers have found that students identify, personally, with a range of characters that are portrayed in your adaptation (not just Charlie in his role of protagonist). Several teachers have claimed, however, that while students are generally able to relate to aspects of Charlie and Jasper's coming-of-age narratives, they are less sympathetic when it comes to the consideration of Mrs Bucktin's own coming-of-age story. Could you talk about how your text delves into the lives and experiences of Australian women and girls in the 1960s and today?

KM: I'm glad your students are finding different characters they relate to – that was very important to me, especially as this play began its life as a show for young people.

That said, I'm not surprised your students find it hard to understand Mrs Bucktin. I don't think I would have either, as a teenager. In fact, I know I didn't, because the Mrs Bucktin I created for the play (with Craig's blessing) was an amalgamation of the Mrs

Bucktin from the book and my very own mother!

To explain … The more I looked at Mrs Bucktin, the more I saw similarities between her, my mother, and the women in the town I grew up in, which was sadly not that dissimilar to Corrigan. It is not an easy life for a woman in an isolated country town of traditionally 'male' industries, and especially not in the 1960s. To help your students understand Mrs Bucktin, I'd love them to look at all the hints in the text that she gives us about her life. She tells us she comes from the city, but has found herself in a town she neither likes nor understands. She hints that she had bigger dreams for herself, but somehow became trapped in a loveless marriage that she doesn't have the means to escape. We find out that she has recently miscarried a daughter. (Remember, Mrs Bucktin would have received no psychological assistance in a 1960s country town for this loss.) She tells us she is terrified of the town she lives in – she sees what it does to young girls and women. It turns them into things to be kept, kidnapped or killed. She sees her little boy turning into a man in that very same town … and it scares the hell out of her. What if he becomes that too? What if she loses him too? She loves Charlie deeply, but does not feel she is a very good mother. And she knows if she stays any longer in that town, she won't survive it. These days, we'd say Mrs Bucktin has severe depression, possibly post-natal. Add all of those things up, and you can see that Mrs Bucktin is a grief-stricken woman, desperate to be loved, to be seen, to be held, to *live*. And so she does all she can to get out of Corrigan, even if that makes her look dreadful to everyone else.

The speech she gives Charlie in Act 2 – the 'silence and space' speech – is almost word for word what I heard one of my mother's friends say through tears when I was growing up. I didn't understand it then, but I do now that I am a little older … Luckily, I take great relief in the fact that we have moved on so much since the 1960s when it comes to feminism and gender freedoms and mental health awareness. I hope we can now understand the choices of Mrs Bucktin, despite her undeniable flaws. She is a rebellious modern girl, stuck in the life of a 1960s housewife, grieving and afraid and desperate to escape. To live. To survive. When we acknowledge these parts of Mrs Bucktin, I hope our hearts open up to her plight a little more, but maybe that takes a little more life experience to recognise …

Now onto the Wishart sisters …

Where Mrs Bucktin is a little girl trapped in the body of a woman, Eliza Wishart is old before her time, trapped in the body of a girl. Again, because of the dark heart of the town and its secrets, Eliza – and Laura – have been exposed to things that no human should ever experience. Laura has been taken by the darkest parts of this world in a place she should have been the safest. Like her sister, Eliza is also on the precipice of survival or demise. But instead of running away from the scene of the crime like Mrs Bucktin does, or like Laura does, Eliza decides to illuminate it. Her trauma is happening in real time in front of us, and the only way she can exorcise it is to call attention to it publicly. By burning down her own house of horror, Eliza sends her own hell to hell in order to move forward.

All three of these women – Mrs Bucktin, Laura and Eliza – represent important stepping stones along the pathway of feminism. I love them all deeply and feel very grateful that Craig allowed me to evolve them further in the play. As an added note, out of the 20-odd plays I've written, there are only two that I've ever taken a role in – one was as Rose in *The Seed*, an autobiographical piece. The other was as Mrs Bucktin. Besides Rose, she is the closest character I have ever written to a member of my own community. When her dialogue doesn't come from Craig, it comes directly from my mother, my aunts, my grandmother, or the women I grew up around in my own small town. The older I get, the more I understand her pain and frustration. But I'm also glad that when my own mother ran away from her personal Corrigan, she took me with her.

(By the way 'Wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one gets full first' was my Grandma's favourite saying … Tough love.)

GYC: Thank you for sharing aspects of your own story with us here, Kate, and bringing these rich extra layers to our reading! Your ability to interweave elements of memoir in both your writing and performances has been spoken about at length in responses to your acclaimed play, *The Seed*. Is the inclusion of biographical details important to your process of adaptation? And have you made similar interventions in the texts you have adapted more recently, such as Ruth Park's *The Harp in the South*?

KM: *The Seed* was about as autobiographical as my work gets, but of course, there's an element of memoir in any play I take on. In fact, that's usually WHY I take on a story – because there's an authentic connection on some level. For *Jasper Jones*, I recognised

my own childhood in Charlie Bucktin, my own town in Corrigan. In *The Harp in the South*, my working class Irish heritage was stirred and I wanted to bring the words and work of Ruth Park to the stage – she was someone I had long admired as a feminist writer. In most of my plays there is more than a sprinkle of real-life. I name characters after family and friends. I include songs my grandparents used to sing. I describe the soft hair of lost lovers, or use turns of phrase that conjure certain personal memories … There is ALWAYS a character named Trevor after my favourite uncle. And there is always an 'Oh my stars!' shouted by someone … They're little things. But they're my own personal thumbprint on a play.

GYC: One of the many things that we find remarkable about your play is the way in which it guides and subtly educates readers/audiences without being didactic. Did you envision a specific audience or readership while writing your adaptation? And, while *Jasper Jones* is a text that is well-known for its many literary allusions and intertextual inferences, we were also wondering if there were any other dramatic texts or performances that inspired you and that you think could be of use to students?

KM: Thanks! That's lovely feedback.

The play was originally commissioned by Barking Gecko Theatre Company, which is a West Australian theatre that is aimed specifically at young audiences and/or families. One of the most important things we can do as artists and educators is to introduce theatre to as many people as we can, from as many different cultures and backgrounds, so that the wonderfully diverse stories and legacies and experiences of this country don't ever get lost or forgotten. The best way to get diversity into our theatres is to make theatre accessible to people from a young age. So that played a huge part in why I accepted the task of adapting *Jasper Jones*, as well as the way I envisioned bringing this play to its audience.

I wanted young people to see this story and see themselves, but also be transported to the town of Corrigan half a century before. I wanted families, students and educators to be able to discuss the play with one another at interval and when they left the theatre. And of course, I wanted all of them to know that the act of 'going to the theatre' should not be something enjoyed by just a privileged few – it is an experience that everyone should have, regularly. It is a vital and ancient pastime of sharing language, culture and stories that must never be lost.

In terms of the crafting of the play itself, it was important to me that it was never didactic and never talked down to the young people in the audience. I didn't want to put anything in soft focus, or censor Craig's work in any way. Corrigan is a microcosm of the real world, and so I made sure that despite its theatricality, the play was accessible and recognisable through its characters and themes. Scars and all.

I don't tend to read other books or plays or watch too much when I'm writing – I stick to the text I'm adapting or writing so that I don't get influenced too much by someone else's writing style. But I do a *lot* of research. With *Jasper Jones*, that research involved the Aboriginal history of Western Australia, the migrant history of Western Australia, articles on the Stolen Generation, and the music and culture of 1960s Australia. Luckily, I come from a very diverse West Australian town very similar to Corrigan, and so I had an amazing array of people I could chat to about that time, that place, those memories … These points of research helped craft the pathways through the play, and also the best ways to present the matters at the heart of the play on various levels.

(One text *Jasper Jones* reminded me of a lot was *The Shark Net* by Robert Drewe, which is also an ABC TV series. It has a lot of crossover in its protagonists, the location and time of the story, and the ever-present shadow of Eric Cooke hanging over the story … Recommended reading.)

Something that is very important to me in the writing of any play, and that I include as another kind of textual reference point, are the various voices that end up having to create the roles for the stage. I want the actors who perform these roles to have power and ownership over them, especially those that come from a different background to me. As a result, the play will often go through a huge shift when it arrives in the rehearsal room, to make it as authentic to these actors as possible, but also to keep them safe. This play has a lot of trauma in it – cultural, emotional, generational, political, sexual – and I don't ever want an actor to have to relive something they shouldn't have to night after night. So the text that you are studying is never set in stone, and never has been. My published texts are usually just one iteration of many options. They change vastly with every new production, simply because of the different humans that embody them each time, as well as the ever-shifting landscape around

them. I guess what I'm saying is, as important as it is to research a text, and have touchstone influences, it's just as important to always keep a foot in the here and now … To check in on who is telling the story at any given time and asking if they feel the need to change the play at all, or even to double down on something that may already be there. That way a play is always truly current, resonant and authentic.

GYC: It is interesting to think how this might be paralleled with the different responses readers also bring to the text. Do you think reading the play, rather than watching it, affects how students engage and respond to its content?

KM: It depends on what you mean by 'reading the play'. Plays are always best when seen live onstage, but of course, that's not always possible. So the next best thing is reading it *aloud* as a *group*. That way you still have performers and audience in the same space – often with people acting as both performer and audience member – and the true energy and spirit of the text is alive and present. Plays are not books. They are road maps. They are meant to be activated. So I encourage you to always do the play that honour – read it aloud. Get up out of your chair if you can. Work it. Embody it. Let it fill you. That's why it's a 'play'.

GYC: Finally, when examining your play students are prompted to make connections between the text and their own lives, specifically their socio-cultural experiences. As a result, students often link their personal responses to key issues within Australia and the wider world, including debates around changing the date of Australia Day, or the racist treatment of Adam Goodes, or 'Black Lives Matter' discussions. How do you think the play might speak to the contemporary lives of young readers today and was this something you grappled with personally while writing?

KM: As much as I tried to make the play resonate with our current world, I didn't grapple too much with young audiences' interpretations – I worried more about getting in trouble with their parents! I had seen the way *Jasper Jones* had been responded to as a novel by a vast array of young people and so I knew there was something there that resonated. But I also trusted the young people I was writing for. I was so excited to turn the characters and story of Craig's book into a living, breathing thing, because I knew it would translate authentically into real life for the young audiences.

At its heart, *Jasper Jones* deals with things that young people know about more than anyone – fear, friendship, frustration, awkwardness, loneliness, first love, hope … And there's no better way of exploring that humanity than sitting with your fellow young humans and laughing, crying, gasping, thinking and conversing together. Young people do that better than anyone. Their hearts and minds are open. It's a joy to write for them. What's harder is reopening minds and hearts that have been long closed.

I didn't just leave the hope to the audience, though. I had so much hope, as I adapted *Jasper Jones*. I hoped that young readers/audiences never lost the gift of connection between their own lives and those of the characters in the play. I hoped they recognised the things that have changed for the better since 1960, and I hoped they'd see the things that still need to be changed and were determined to do something about. I hoped they'd realise that they have the power to be the change. I hoped they'd take the slats out of their window and see the world with objective eyes and empathetic hearts, starting with their own backyard …

This play is now nearly 10 years old since I first started work on it and it makes me so happy when I get correspondence from people who decided to be a writer or an actor or an artist after they read it or saw it. I hope all of your students know that they are all Charlies and Jaspers and Jeffreys and Elizas and Lauras and Craigs and Kates. (Hopefully not too many Warwicks!) They all have a story to tell – multiple stories, in fact – and there is always a home for their stories on the stage.

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Mulvany's Q&A session has been embedded in the teaching of *Jasper Jones* at GYC. Throughout 2022, Dr Hall visited English 3 classrooms to unpack the interview in relation to key scenes in the play and actively assist in the development of students' personal responses. During these sessions, both the overt and subtle ways in which Mulvany's responses assist students in considering the 'truths' they 'acknowledge' were discussed.

One of the aspects of the interview that emerged as a primary area of focus relates to Mulvany's comments about beats being placed at moments where she wants the audience/readership 'to sit in […] to pick up a breadcrumb that's been dropped […] to take a breath' **(cross-reference)**. By framing the beats

as breadcrumbs to be picked-up by audiences/ readers, Mulvany opens the text up for students, not only building their capacity to recognise important inferences and allusions (moments where the story continues to unfold beyond the script), but also giving them tools to use their own personal context to frame their interpretations. For example, in Act 1, Scene 2, when Charlie is worrying that Laura's killer might still be in the glade watching them, Mulvany deploys a beat that is particularly loaded:

> CHARLIE: Shit, Jasper! What if whoever did this is still here? Watching us!
> JASPER: There's no-one here. I can tell.
> *A beat.*
> We gotta find out who did this, Charlie. We gotta find out who killed Laura. (6).

The silence of this beat alludes to the profundity of Aboriginal knowledge systems and the unspeakable trauma Jasper experiences navigating the colonised landscape, while, at the same time, emphasising Charlie's – and by extension white Australia's – ignorance. A refusal to expressively share, to articulate certain traumas, is not uncommon in modes of First Nations storytelling (Hall, 2019; Ravenscroft, 2012; Wright, 2002). Mulvany's sensitivity to this, as a non-Indigenous writer, is maintained throughout her adaptation via the timely placement of beats and her refusal to fully articulate some of her characters' experiences. By unpacking what is implied through beats such as the one above, students are given an in-road into the text, a place where they can potentially parallel their own ignorance or knowledge with that of the characters.

Mulvany's interview inspires both students and teachers to interrogate the myriad of ways that their standpoint position intersects with their interpretation of the text. Since conducting the interview in 2022, we have continued to track its impact on teaching and learning through teacher focus groups and guided processes of reflective writing. In a formal written reflection for our follow-up study, one English 3 teacher, Cassandra Christensen, clearly articulates what she sees to be the pedagogical benefits of Mulvany's interview for both her students and her own personal grappling. Embedding the interview into her classroom practice, writes Christensen, has 'allowed her students to explore various perspectives relating to race and reflect more deeply upon their own standpoint positions' but it has also, and perhaps most importantly, prompted her to

explore her own naivety alongside them (2023). By confronting 'some of the metaphoric "slats" that had been impeding their understanding', both students *and* teachers become more likely to 'engage in processes of empathetic critical reading' and, thereby, work towards decolonising the English classroom (Christensen, 2023).

Notes

1 Kate Mulvany is an award-winning playwright, screenwriter and actor. Her adaptation of Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* in 2021 and her adaptation of Park's *The Harp in the South* have both premiered at the Sydney Theatre Company, the latter having won both the Stage and Major AWGIE Awards and nominated for a Helpmann award for Best New Australian Work. The STC also premiered Kate's AWGIE-nominated adaptation of Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart* in 2019. Kate's original play *The Mares* received the 2020 Tasmanian Theatre Award for Outstanding New Writing and an AWGIE nomination. Kate wrote and starred in autobiographical play *The Seed* for Belvoir Street Theatre and it won the Sydney Theatre Award for Best Independent Production. Kate's other plays include *The Rasputin Affair, Masquerade* (adapted from Kit Williams' novel), *Jasper Jones* (adapted from Craig Silvey's novel), *Medea* (co-written with Anne-Louise Sarks), *The Danger Age* and *The Web*. As a screenwriter, Kate has worked on the development of several Australian series including writing two episodes of the Lingo Pictures/Foxtel series *Upright*. As an award-winning stage and screen actor Kate has played leading roles for many major Australian theatre companies and is a regular in acclaimed series *Hunters* for Amazon. In 2022 she appeared in *Elvis* and has recently finished filming the upcoming Robbie Williams biopic *Better Man*.

2 A follow-up project measuring the impact of Mulvany's interview has just been completed by GYC teachers and Davis Centre staff, for more information about this please see our research article, entitled 'Towards decolonising white curricula: A reflective approach to teaching Kate Mulvany's Jasper Jones,' in the forthcoming special issue of *The Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* (71.1).

3 GYC English faculty staff who collaborated in focus group discussions: Cassandra Christensen, Lisa Herd, Kristin Leeds, Anita Manners, Christina Martini, Leah May, Bronwyn Moran, Michael Moses, and Emma Puszkar.

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