

You Can Teach That: The power of language

Associate Professor Jeanine Leane

Important notice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers: Pages linked throughout this resource may contain names, images, and footage of persons who are now deceased. We acknowledge the significance and sensitivity of this content and advise reader and viewer discretion.

Curriculum overview

Through subject English, students explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural knowledge, traditions and experiences as they are represented and communicated through text. Specifically, subject English provides students with the opportunity to:

- Appreciate and investigate texts created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and illustrators
- Analyse and respond to texts that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Examine texts that include events, Country/Place, identities and languages, and
- Discuss the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

In the [Victorian Curriculum 7–10 English Version 2.0](#) explicit references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are found in the below content descriptions:

Year 7

- Identify and explore ideas, points of view, characters, events and/or issues in literary texts, drawn from different historical, cultural and/or social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E7LE01](#))

Year 8

- Explain the ways that ideas, issues and points of view in literary texts drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, and a wide range of Australian and world authors, may represent the values of individuals and groups ([VC2E8LE01](#))

Year 9

- Analyse the representations of people and places in literary texts, drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E9LE01](#))

Year 10

- Analyse representations of individuals, groups and places and evaluate how they reflect their context in literary texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E10LE01](#))

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority provides more guidance around the responsibilities of educators to help students deepen their knowledge of the oldest continuous living cultures and contemporary First Nations communities. The below organising ideas are from the Victorian Curriculum F-10 Version 2.0 and are reflected in the *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series.

Country/Place	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Australia maintain a deep connection to, and responsibility for, Country and Place and have holistic values and belief systems that are connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways. (VC2CCPAC1)
Culture	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are diverse and have distinct cultural expressions, such as language, customs and beliefs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural expressions, while also maintaining the right to control, protect and develop culture as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. (VC2CCPAC1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life reflect unique ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing. (VC2CCPAC2)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to the world's oldest continuous cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples demonstrate resilience in the maintenance, practice and revitalisation of culture despite the many historic and enduring impacts of colonisation, and they continue to celebrate and share the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures. (VC2CCPAC3)
People	Australia has 2 distinct First Nations Peoples; each encompasses a diversity of nations across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have occupied the Australian continent and adjacent islands from time immemorial. (VC2CCPAP1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have sophisticated political, economic and social organisation systems, which include but are not limited to family and kinship structures, laws, traditions, customs, land tenure systems and protocols for strong governance and authority, (VC2CCPAP2)
	The significant and ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their histories and cultures are acknowledged locally, nationally and globally. (VC2CCPAP3)

Capabilities

- [Critical and Creative Thinking](#)
- [Intercultural Capabilities](#)
- [Personal and Social Capability](#)

Introduction to the resource

Associate Professor Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri writer, poet and academic from southwest New South Wales. Her poetry, short stories, critique, and essays have been published in *Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Antipodes*, *Overland*, and the *Sydney Review of Books*. Leane has published widely in the area of Aboriginal literature, writing otherness, literary critique and creative non-fiction. Leane was the recipient of the University of Canberra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Poetry Prize, and she has won the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Prize for Poetry twice. In 2019, she was the Red Room Poetry Fellow for her project called 'Voicing the Unsettled Space: Rewriting the Colonial Mythscape'. Leane teaches Creative Writing and Aboriginal Literature at the University of Melbourne where her research looks at Indigenous storytelling and the archive. In 2023, Leane was the winner of the David Harold Tribe Prize for poetry – Australia's richest poetry prize.

In this interview for VATE's *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, Leane discusses the power of language in shaping identity, subverting societal pressures, and the role of the English language as a tool of colonialism and oppression.

Key knowledge

- History of colonial education
- Rematriation and repatriation of language
- English as a lingua franca
- National literature and story/ies of the nation

Key concepts

- Positionality, relationality and locality of Aboriginal languages
- Positionality, values and context of self
- Language as power
- Cultural rigour
- English vs literature

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	The role of the English language as a tool of colonialism and oppression, especially in education
7:04 mins	Rematriation and repatriation of First Languages
11:47 mins	Destiny Deacon's reclamation of the word 'Blak' and other creative appropriations of the English language
17:50 mins	Protocols for terminology when working with First Nations texts
24:39 mins	Settler narratives and selecting First Nations texts

The following activities, prompts, lesson ideas and external links are designed to interrogate and embed the concepts, ideas, questions, themes and knowledge presented in the accompanying video. They are designed to gain further understanding of the topic and explore how the topic can be utilised, dissected, or cemented in the classroom. Materials and activities in this section have been selected with a view to creating opportunities for bringing the content of this topic to students and colleagues.

The structure of these activities has been inspired by the [8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogy framework](#) which is grounded in the research of Dr Karen Martin and Dr Martin Nakata and created by Department of Education staff, James Cook University's School of Indigenous Studies, and the Western New South Wales Regional Aboriginal Education Team.

LAND LINKS: Interrogating positionality, relationality and context

Leane explains that Aboriginal languages are grounded in three things:

- Positionality
- Relationality
- Locality

Positionality is the way in which each person's various social identities such as gender, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, social class, and spiritual beliefs intersect and influence the way in which the world is seen and experienced. To acknowledge your positionality is to "start with the truth of your story, the other people in it, and the factors that shaped it" (Holloway-Clarke, 2024).

Leane explains that relationality refers to the way in which language is "connected to the environment in a way that English isn't", the way in which language can refer to who owns something, and "who belongs to what people or who belongs to what place". This term explains the complex interconnectivity of spiritual, social and community relationships that are reflected in language – of relationships to land, water, plants, and animals, as well as to ceremonies, ancestors and future generations. Leane remarks that Aboriginal languages have an "animacy" that English words do not. She uses the example of a tree and the way in which Aboriginal words capture where you are in relation to the tree and who you are in relation to the tree, not just where the tree is. [Dudgeon and Bray \(2019\)](#) write that "Understanding Indigenous 'relationality' requires attention to the process of connection – '[t]he way to understand anything is in its relationship'" (p.3).

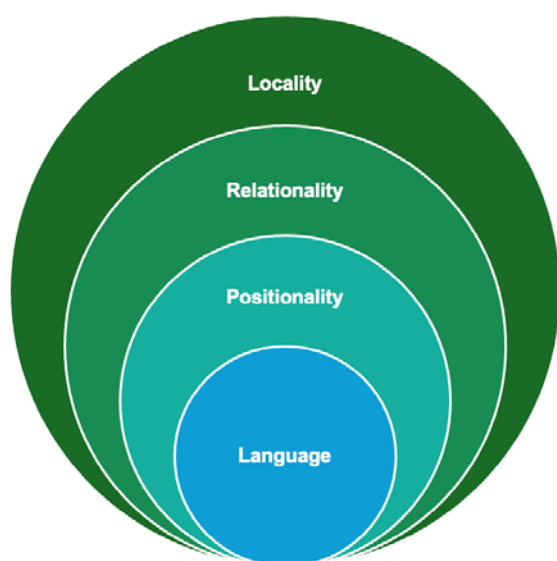
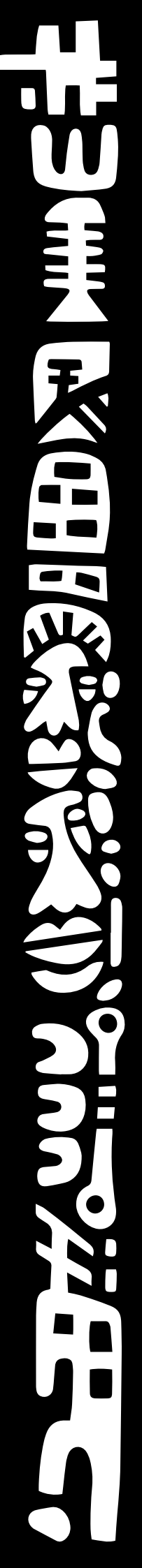


Figure 1

Locality (or radical locality as Leane prefers) refers to the "Aboriginal context, per se" as each Aboriginal language is specific to a locale, or every person's nation or Country. Languages are rich and varied, and before colonisation, there were more than 250 Indigenous languages in Australia. In 2019, 90% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were considered endangered. In her 2014 paper, [Mary Graham](#) explains that "Place, being, belonging and connectedness all arise out of a locality in Land" (p.3). She writes, "I am located therefore I am" (p.3).

A helpful way to visualise these terms and their relationship to language is shown in figure 1.



Leane asks teachers to “develop some cultural rigour and critique their own positionality and values” as well as the context they’re in and the context that they’re going into (i.e.: the classroom). Some questions to think about in doing so are below. These questions could be used individually, in small year level teams or even as a whole English faculty.

- What are my values?
- How do I communicate my values to my students?
- What are our school values?
- From what position do I look at and experience the world?
- How is my position different from my colleagues, my school, my community?
- What do I think is good literature?
- What stories are important to me?
- How do I amplify these stories?
- What stories do I exclude (consciously or unconsciously)?

Leane says “English is not sacred” and it is okay to expose students to texts that challenge the perceived story of the nation.

NON-LINEAR: Story/ies of the nation

Leane's argument is this: the texts you select perpetuate a message about the people they're about (or not about). These texts contribute to the kind of worlds that students learn about and experience. They reiterate the notion that the Australian nation is built on certain kinds of stories: stories that exclude Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or include inaccurate and ill-informed representations. As Leane states, "you're not teaching a story of a nation unless you have Aboriginal literature" and as she reminds us, "the most valuable cultural tool [First Nations writers] give settler readers is the voice of the author". In an article for *IndigenousX*, Darby Jones writes;

In a society where colonial (mis)representations of Aboriginal people continue to shape the consciousness of the nation, the counter-stories within Aboriginal literature offer up diverse and authentic representations of Aboriginal history and lives. When it comes to breaking free from the confinements of the settler mythscape, literature is a crucial tool in our arsenal. Through its transmission of cultural knowledge and its practices of storytelling, Aboriginal literature dismantles the preconceived ideas of Aboriginality borne from (mis)representation and reimagines a future in which the nation comes to know us not as we have been constructed, but as we are.

One suggestion that Leane gives is to place a settler narrative that should be critiqued *beside* an Indigenous text that tells a completely different story. Leane uses the example of critiquing Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Note her choice of preposition – whilst (in this instance) she doesn't suggest a complete doing away with settler narratives and other stories, her invitation is to place a First Nations text *beside* these texts and interrogate the first text for its context, positionality, and authority on the material being explored.

Leane says "The role of national literature is to shape a national narrative". How do the texts you select dictate the national narrative your students are exposed to and contribute to the national narrative that your students believe? To what extent do they align with a preoccupation with the "safe story of the nation" or "the pernicious persistence of 'this is good literature'"? Consider Leane's words in her review of Evelyn Araluen's *Dropbear*:

Colonial literatures read as a vast catalogue of misrepresentations of First Nations Peoples and the Countries we belong to. Of all the things brought to these shores in an attempt to erase us – guns, germs, foreign crowd diseases, poisons, religions, missions 'protection boards' government policies of assimilation and integration – writing has been one of the most pernicious, enduring and detrimental tools of erasure.

Represent the information uncovered in this exercise with a cluster diagram. The aim of these diagrams is to visualise the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, perspectives, content and ideas can be brought into the literature that is already being studied and identify opportunities for addressing areas of weakness. Some ideas for getting started include:

- Start with a text in the centre and then add all of the themes, techniques and elements of craft that can be explored in this text from here.
- List two texts as starting points and work out the ways in which you could connect them both, moving beyond literary craft.
- Start with a particular theme in the centre and then add the ways this can be explored in the text, with additional clusters added for resources you need to consult.
- Start with the skill/s you would like students to develop and cluster ideas for how they can attain these through text selection and analysis.

Revisiting the common types of unconscious bias and how these manifest in the classroom would be a useful activity to undertake alongside the cluster diagram.

COMMUNITY LINKS: 'People come with an assumption'

Leane comments that "people come to things with assumptions". In terms of First Nations material, she is referring to two things.

First, is the generalised information that students may recall from history lessons or through having been exposed to inaccurate information. These kinds of assumptions are counterproductive to the study of text as students conflate and homogenise the experiences of First Nations people or draw upon anecdotes and information that are simply false, harmful or misleading. Leane explains that time spent addressing these educational errors is counterproductive to the study of the text at hand.

Secondly, Leane remarks that students come to subject English with values and expectations about literature that they can mistake for being rules and regulations about how a book, or a story, should look, sound, or read. Leane says "English is not sacred" and it is okay to expose students to texts that challenge the perceived story of the nation. She reminds teachers that it is their job to "be expansive" and writing in Aboriginal languages is "not the author's limitation" but that it instead presents an opportunity for authentic engagement with Aboriginal culture and identity. Amplifying those texts that use Aboriginal languages is a crucial step in doing this and Leane reminds us that "there's a wealth of information out there and most of it is not getting published in inaccessible books anymore, like it was". Throughout this interview, she gives examples of writing that plays with and uses Aboriginal languages, including her own:

- [Mullumbimby](#) by Melissa Lucashenko
- [Tara June Winch's](#) writing
- [Dropbear](#) by Evelyn Araluen
- [Ellen van Neerven's](#) poetry
- Poetry by [Alison Whittaker](#)
- Poetry by [Jazz Money](#)
- [Luke Patterson's](#) writing
- [Lisa Fuller's](#) writing

Red Room Poetry's [Poetry in First Languages](#) repository houses many poems in Aboriginal languages by poets across Australia. Explore some of the poems with students encouraging them to enjoy, learn from and consider the impact of reading and writing poetry in First Languages. Red Room Poetry also has a learning resource to accompany the 2023 commissioned poems [here](#). Some notable poems worth exploring include:

- ['calbunyas initiation'](#) by Kaitlen Wellington
- ['Ningimpi Nungampi Paywuta Manta'](#) by Theresa Sainty
- ['Our Responsibility'](#) by Kerry Bulloogeenoo Archibald Moran
- ['Ngurambang yali - Country speaks'](#) and ['The Gatherers'](#) by Jeanine Leane
- ['Baraya Barray \(Sing Country\)'](#) - YouTube video and reading.
- ['Bigger Than School Stuff'](#) by Declan Furber Gillick (note: profanity on page 7)

Other resources to explore with students that use Aboriginal languages include Baker Boy's [Meditjin](#) that he raps in Yolngu Matha as well as English, Yothu Yindi's [Treaty](#) and numerous recordings by [Shellie Morris](#). Leane's challenge for teachers is to learn "how to weave this in" with typical classes and discussions.

Further, AustLit and [BlackWords](#) is home to a curated list of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources. Familiarising yourself with this resource is one way of expanding your repertoire of First Nations work including [a list](#) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Young Adult fiction and [101 Links to Black Writers and Voices](#) (2020).

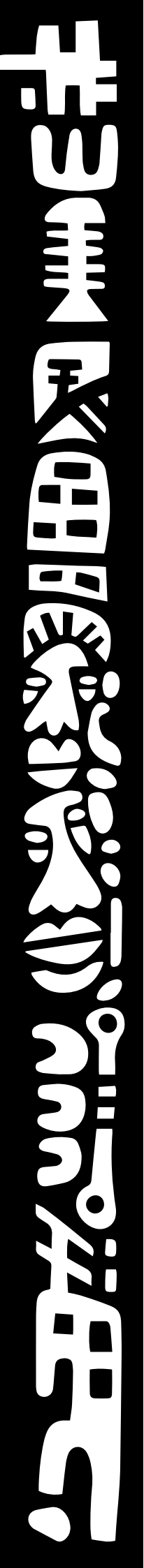
ADDITIONAL READING

Leane has written extensively about subject English, the role of literature, storying the nation and of the value on Aboriginal literature. Some suggested reading and criticism include:

- '[Teaching with BlackWords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Storytellers](#)', AusLit, 2007
- '[Tracking our Country in Settler Literature](#)', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2014)
- '[Other peoples' stories](#)', *Overland*, Issue 225, summer 2016
- '[Subjects of the imagination: on dropping the settler pen](#)', *Overland*, December 2018
- [Editorial](#), *English in Australia*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2019) (VATE members need to be logged in to their VATE account to download this edition)
- '[No longer malleable stuff](#)', *Overland*, Issue 241, summer 2020
- '[Cultural Rigour: First Nations Critical Culture](#)', *Sydney Review of Books*, February 2023

Other articles and essays:

- Lisa Fuller, '[Why Culturally Aware Reviews Matter](#)', *Kill Your Darlings*, October 2020
- Alison Whittaker, '[White critics don't know how to deal with the golden age of Indigenous stories](#)', *The Guardian*, March 2019



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