

TEACHING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

You Can Teach That: Creativity and cultural advocacy

Kirli Saunders

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
- Engage with and respond to literature that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives for 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 English 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

Kirli Saunders (OAM) is a proud Gunai woman who rarely stays in her lane. She's a multi-award-winning multidisciplinary artist, writer, singer-songwriter and consultant. Saunders creates to connect, to make change, advocating for the land and her communities. She was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her contribution to the arts (2022). Saunders has partnered with global organisations including Google, Fender, Sydney Opera House, Qantas, Spotify, Mecca and Aesop on visual art and writing projects. Her award-winning film collaboration, *Cry of the Glossy* (Grassland Films) has been screened around the world. Saunders created drone installation, *Buungbaa Ma Ndhū* (Fremantle Biennale and Ngunuggula Gallery) and voice to art digital installation, *TRACES* (Google, Magabala, Sydney Opera House with Kamsani Bin Salleh). Her books include *Eclipse* (Allen & Unwin), *Bindi* (Magababa), *Afloat* (Hardie Grant) and *The Land Recalls You* (Scholastic). Saunders' solo theatre show, *Yandha Djanbay* was staged with Merrigong Theatre. She is currently recording her first album with Mark Harding, in their project, Cooeee.

In this interview for VATE's *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives*, Saunders discusses the role of art and creativity in storytelling and the ways in which art intersects with cultural advocacy.

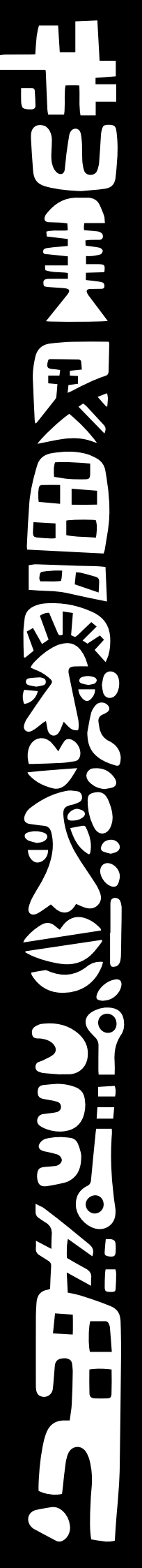
Key knowledge

- Storytelling
- Embodied artforms
- Engaging with community
- Individual and systemic beliefs and values
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)

Key concepts

- Cultural advocacy
- Cultural appropriation
- Collective responsibility
- 'White supremacy culture' (Tema Okun)
- Reciprocity
- Empathy

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	In what ways is creativity and artistic expression used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
2:52 mins	The intersection of cultural advocacy and creativity
7:02 mins	Art as cultural advocacy and art as protest
10:42 mins	How does the medium that you choose reflect the content, message, or purpose of your work?
17:05 mins	Is it appropriate to analyse, dissect and evaluate work by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that might include cultural rituals or symbols?
21:30 mins	Empathy and the danger of co-opting culture
26:33 mins	Storytelling, text selection and the importance of context
29:05 mins	'Art is everywhere' and engaging with community
32:13 mins	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)
35:16 mins	A reading of 'Greedy' from Kirli's poetry collection <i>Eclipse</i>



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 for English teachers 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.

NON-LINEAR: Arriving at self-expression

Saunders explains that First Nations cultures, knowledges, languages and stories “belong to a people”. She says, “We can’t just go and take what we want from it [a story, language, culture] in an extractive or transactional way”. Saunders first addresses this when she explores the word ‘use’ and the notion of doing something or employing something for one purpose or another – in this instance, it is the ‘use’ of creativity and artistic expression in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Saunders explains that these things are part of the identities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and assist people to “arrive” at self-expression.

Saunders clarifies that in a Western framework, creativity is a means of “expressing cultural knowledge or story or our experience of the world as First Nations peoples” through dance, song, or other creative pursuits. At the heart of these expressions is “cultural celebration, the preservation of our knowledge and wisdom systems and making sure they continue for all time”.

Saunders’ work is inherently non-linear. [This article](#) from the Australian Museum explains non-linear storytelling and reminds us that when it comes to First Nations storytelling, “no matter where you start, eventually you will hear the whole story; and where the story starts depends on the perspective and context of the storyteller”. Saunders says “I feel like poetry is at the base of almost all of my work”, many of which take on large scale, interactive, multifaceted and embodied dimensions. She discusses some of these projects in this interview and they are linked below. She says “I really like the space in poetry, the ability to take a breath, to pause”. At the conclusion of this interview, Saunders reads her poem ‘Greedy’ and says that the poem could serve as “an example of how all of those parts that we’ve yarned about today come together”. Read the poem and consider the commentary that the spaces in the poem give rise to. Consider the way that ‘Greedy’ serves to express the cultural knowledge, story or experience of Saunders’ family – the “long line of saltwater women”.

The poem is a critique of colonial invasion of Country, as well as of capitalist overconsumption and greed. The poem speaks to the importance of tradition and culture, of stories and women’s business being passed through families, of the environment and living in harmony for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whilst simultaneously reminding the reader of the lasting impact of colonisation on land and sea Country, on families, on culture and tradition, and on the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Other works mentioned by Saunders in this interview:

- [Poetry in First Languages](#) with [Red Room Poetry](#) with Saunders’ poetry [here](#)
- Saunders’ other poetry collections include [Eclipse](#) (2025), [Returning](#) (2023) and [Kindred](#) (2020)
- Saunders also recommends the following poems from her collections: ‘Black Cars’, ‘Black is Beautiful’, ‘You can’t pray the gay out of me’ and ‘The System’
- Saunders’ solo theatre show [Yandha Djanbay \(Go Slowly\)](#)
- Saunders’ light and language installation [First Lights – Buungbaa-ma-ndhu](#)
- [TRACES](#) by Saunders and Kamsani Bin Salleh at the Sydney Opera House

DECONSTRUCT/RECONSTRUCT: “We are all swimming in the waters of white supremacy culture” (Tema Okun, 2021)

Saunders discusses the work of Tema Okun, a non-First Nations person who works as an anti-racism educator and activist in the United States. Okun’s 1999 essay ‘White Supremacy Culture’ outlines values, behaviours and characteristics of white middle and owning-class organisations that manifest in their organisational culture and attitudes. You can read the original essay [here](#) as well as an updated article (2021) [here](#). Okun herself explains that the characteristics she defined are “not meant to describe all white people. They are meant to describe the norms of middle-class and owning class culture, a culture we are all required to navigate regardless of our multiple identities”. Here, white supremacy culture “is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value” (Okun, 2021, p. 4).

The list of characteristics outlined by Okun is below. More can be viewed in her original essay including explanations of how these [characteristics](#) manifest and potential antidotes, with revisions and additions in the [2021 essay](#):

- Perfectionism
- Sense of urgency
- Defensiveness
- Quantity over quality
- Worship of the written word
- Only one right way
- Paternalism
- Either/or thinking
- Power hoarding
- Fear of open conflict
- Individualism
- ‘I’m the only one’
- Progress is bigger, more
- Objectivity
- Right to comfort

Saunders says she loves to look at Okun’s list of characteristics and consider how she is being influenced in her thinking or how others may be influenced by certain ‘frames’. How these characteristics are upheld by community, society and culture at large can impact relationships with others. Importantly, Okun implores people to use the list to understand white supremacy culture rather than accuse, shame or blame people for their actions. Saunders says, “We know that we’re stronger when we’re in collaboration and in connection and in the community” echoing Okun’s sentiment and reflection on the ways in which white supremacy culture can harm everyone.

A lot of the activities that have been included in the [You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives](#) resources have been grounded in thinking about your own values, views and potential biases. Doing some of this work is uncomfortable and challenging, and it is a vulnerable process to recognise and admit that parts of your processes may be reinforcing racism or colonial attitudes and beliefs. Okun’s list of characteristics is another way of thinking about the ways in which certain practices reinforce white (or colonial) attitudes.

Let’s consider the characteristic of urgency. Schools are, by their very nature, places that are ruled by deadlines, schedules and timelines/tables. The need to reach decisions quickly is often perceived as a necessity. They are results driven and action oriented, often in the name of expediency. Schools are bureaucratic and inherently hierarchical. Okun [writes](#) that white supremacy culture engenders “a culture of urgency in those of us who are working to dismantle it” knowing that the inability to distinguish *actual* urgent and important tasks from *perceived* urgent tasks makes it difficult to slow down and take the time to make inclusive, democratic and considered decisions that have long-term consequences for anti-colonial work. Think about:

- The ways in which your school leadership dictates the timing of the book listing of texts
- The frequency in which texts should be ‘replaced’
- The amount of money that your department is allocated to spend on texts
- Whether people who read quickly and their opinions are privileged when it comes to facilitating discussions about texts
- Who gets to have the final say about what will be studied and why.

Choose one of the other characteristics outlined by Okun and see if you can apply it to the organisational culture of your school or department. You could even review some of the characteristics in light of the processes your students follow or tasks they undertake. Characteristics like ‘quantity over quality’ or ‘worship of the written word’ might apply here.

COMMUNITY LINKS: 'Calling in' and 'calling out'

'Calling in' and 'calling out' are tools that are often used by people when confronting racist and offensive behaviour. [This guide](#) prepared by Harvard University is helpful in demonstrating how to bring attention to the harm caused by certain words and phrases, behaviour, biases, prejudice, microaggressions and discrimination.

Activist Loretta J. Ross' TED talk '[Don't call people out – call them in](#)' explains what it means to calling people in when confronted with their inappropriate behaviour. She outlines three approaches that we can take when confronting someone who demonstrates offensive behaviour:

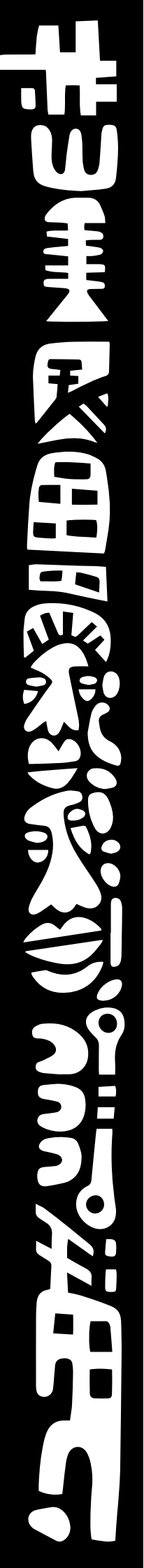
- Calling out
- Calling in
- Calling on

It is worth remembering these approaches when talking with students or colleagues who are at different stages of their decolonial process. You can also apply these same approaches to yourself if you find yourself avoiding accountability. In *The New York Times*, Ross explains "calling out assumes the worst. Calling in involves conversation, compassion and context". In [this article](#), she writes that calling in is a technique that allows parties to move forward and explore someone's ideas and attitudes with love, and to explore their use of harmful language with patience and inquiry rather than shame. [Gina Martin](#), in a recent newsletter for [Teach Us Consent](#), explains that calling in is "not about justifying, allowing or accepting harmful behaviour. It's about committing to disrupt it in the most effective way: by creating space for someone to grow past it".

At the conclusion of [this article](#), Ross shares some examples of how to start a call-in conversation in the classroom and ideas for building a classroom call-in environment. I know that some teachers are concerned about being 'called out' by their students for teaching particular texts or issues. Another way to use this framework is to welcome students and/or colleagues to call-in and admit they do not know or understand something when it comes to First Nations cultures. Saunders says, as others have in the *Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, that it is okay not to know everything and that being open, curious, respectful and prepared to do the research to find out the answers to what you don't know is important. However, Saunders cautions teachers, especially those who blame their own lack of education at school as a reason for not engaging with First Nations texts, "you have ChatGPT and you have Google and you have podcasts and audiobooks, and you really have a responsibility to go in and teach and learn and access that knowledge and to be in relationship with Aboriginal communities".

For Saunders, before you can even begin to safely and genuinely unpack texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, you must "pick apart your own biases and values" – work that can be done parallel to teaching rather than avoiding it altogether. Saunders invites you to share your learning about First Nations storytellers with the students you are teaching so they see how to do this work. Each resource in the [You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives](#) series contains information and questions that you can consider to help unpack your [positionality](#).

"... you really have a responsibility to go in [to the classroom] and teach and learn and access that knowledge and to be in relationship with Aboriginal communities".



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