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Critical considerations of the challenges of teaching national literatures in Australia in the 21st century

Larissa McLean Davies[1] · Susan K. Martin[2] · Lucy Buzacott[1]

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Abstract
Stories and literature play an important and necessary role in understanding the past and in creating the future. Yet, in colonised countries such as Australia, the status of contemporary national texts, particularly those reflecting the diverse voices of Indigenous writers, women, and other marginalised groups, continue to be underrepresented in schools. In this article, we explore the reasons why Australian texts continue to be marginalised in education, when there is a clear desire for diverse Australian voices amongst the reading public. We also consider the kinds of national identities that current text selection and teaching policies are creating and maintaining in schools. In order to develop these ideas, we draw on data collected via a survey of secondary English teachers for a pilot research project called *Teaching Australia*. In this project, we explored the Australian texts being selected and championed by teachers in secondary schools, the perceptions of nation and national identity these convey, and teachers' approaches to including diverse Australian texts in their classrooms. In the final section of the paper, we consider some future opportunities for engagement with diverse Australian literature for teachers and students of English.

Keywords Literature · English · Text selection · Nation · Stories

Stories, politics, justice: Australian literature in public discourse

In June 2020, motivated by the uprising of protests in the United States of America, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in cities and towns across Australia, to protest against systemic racism. While the protests in the United States were a response to the murder of African American man George Floyd at the hands of

✉ Lucy Buzacott
lucy.buzacott@unimelb.edu.au

[1] University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

[2] La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

police, the protests in Australia drew attention to the failure of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) to make any substantive change to rates of death in incarceration. Since the commission, over 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody (The Guardian, 2020). The protests also highlighted the urgent need for Indigenous narratives, and the stories of other racially marginalised groups, to offer alternative readings of nation. While the conservative Prime Minister responded to the protests by insisting that Australia was "the most amazing country on earth" (Remeikis, 2020), and slavery was not part of the country's past, the social and mainstream media presented a different view, giving voice to the experiences of Indigenous and non-white Australians including via social media campaigns such as #ShareTheMicNow.[1] Indigenous Australian actor Meyne Wyatt appeared on current affairs program Q&A and closed the episode with a performance of a monologue from his play *City of Gold* (2019), which addresses the reality of living with violence and deaths in custody. Wyatt's raw rendition: "Silence is violence. Complacency is complicity… I don't want to be quiet. I don't want to be humble. I don't want to sit down", has been viewed over 35,000 times on YouTube and has been redistributed through national and international media channels.

The desire for more diverse Australian stories to be told and heard—particularly stories from writers who are not British Australian, CIS-male, straight and middle-class—was also reflected in increased engagement with the published stories of Indigenous and other non-white Australians, a trend that reflects a global move towards reading the work of non-white writers (Flood, 2020; Harris, 2020; Kembrey, 2020). Amongst accounts of the rise in sales in Australia, Kembrey draws attention to the sales of the anthology *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia* (Heiss, 2018) by prominent Indigenous writer Anita Heiss, which increased tenfold, and the Indigenous Publishing House Magabala Books, which also experienced a significant rise in demand for books by Aboriginal writers. For Magabala Books publisher, Rachel Bin Salleh, this 2020 spike in online orders reflects a general upward trend with sales growing 360% over the past 5 years (Kembrey, 2020). The importance of stories by non-white authors has also been recognised in recent literary shortlists and prizes. This includes significant literary prize wins for Indigenous authors Melissa Lucashenko for *Too Much Lip* (Miles Franklin Award 2019), Tara June Winch for *The Yield* (Miles Franklin Award 2020), Alexis Wright for *Tracker* (Magarey Medal 2018; Stella Prize 2018), and Charmaine Papertalk Green for *Nganajungu Yagu* (ALS Gold Medal 2020). While literary awards in Australia emerge from a complex history and are bound up in issues of cultural capital and text production, they play a key role in the creation of a national literary canon (Allington, 2011; Dane, 2020; Lamond, 2011). Recipients remain largely white (Konyu, 2016), but the inclusion of more Indigenous and non-white authors indicates a slow

[1] The #ShareTheMicNow social media campaign was created by Indigenous author Tara June Winch and white author Zoe Foster Blake to give prominence to Black women and their work. The campaign encourages the takeover of prominent white women's social media by Black and Indigenous women to amplify their voices and stories. See https://www.tarajunewinch.com/sharethemicnowaustralia.

shift towards recognition of texts from a greater range of authors as part of the narrative of Australia.

The inclusion of the texts listed above in the long history of literary award winners shifts thinking around Australia as a nation and the stories that emerge from and about it. This point was made dramatically in 2019 when the Victorian Prize for Literature, Australia's richest literary award, was bestowed not on an Australian citizen but on Behrouz Boochani for his text *No Friend But the Mountains* (Wahlquist, 2019). Boochani is a Kurdish-Iranian journalist and refugee who was detained in an offshore facility on Manus Island. This award challenged the previous condition that an awardee must be an Australian resident or citizen. Given that the awards were inaugurated by the Victorian Government in 1985 to "honour literary achievement by Australian writers" (Wheeler Centre Website, 2019), the 2019 prize requires a confrontation with significant questions about what and who is included and excluded in national literatures and how concepts of nation are shifted by stories and their story-tellers.

Although increased engagement from some sections of the public, evident in increased sales and prizes, indicates both the powerful role of literature in social and cultural change, and the urgency of these ideas, this movement is not necessarily reflected in schools, notably in the texts that are listed and selected. Recent research in English curriculum has shown that texts from writers of non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds that are dealing with lives and issues not traditionally represented are not being taken up in educational settings, and that Australian texts generally are marginalised (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2020; Adam et al., 2019; Bliss & Bacalja, 2020; Jogie, 2015; McLean Davies et al., 2020). This means that when Australian secondary students read in schools they are not being exposed to a broad range of voices and experiences but are instead receiving a narrower and more traditional version of literature, one which is imbued with white history and the white canon. This contrast is evident in the shortlist and winners of the Young Australians Best Book Awards (YABBA) which are voted on by students in Victoria, Australia each year. Schools sign up to be involved in the award, and students are asked to provide a list of their favourite Australian books to other children by nominating four Australian titles. Students then vote on their favourite book in the final term of the school year. The winners of the categories 'Fiction for Older Readers' and 'Fiction for Years 7–9' in the years 2009–2018 have all been by white authors and the 'Older Readers' category was won by the same two white, male authors (Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton) for seven years straight (2012–2018) (Young Australians Best Book Awards (YABBA), 2018). This reinforces research that argues that Australian students are dominantly exposed to white, male Australian literature in their school contexts and that this creates a specific and limited canon that circulates within schools and amongst teachers and students (Bliss & Bacalja, 2020; McLean Davies et al., 2020).

Teaching Australian literatures in schools: Curriculum, culture and identity

In order to begin to explore why non-white and female Australian writers, in particular, remain underrepresented in school text lists and curricula, and why student choices, such as those reflected in the YABBA awards, are dominated by white, male writers, it is worth reprising some general points about the historical status of Australian literature in education. In this section, we will also raise curriculum interventions that are intended to elevate the status of national literature in Australian schools; policy positions that will provide context for the project we will discuss in the final section of this paper.

Until the 1940s, as Bill Green and Catherine Beavis note, white Australians were legally British citizens (Green & Beavis, 1996, p. 4). Separated geographically from the place to which they 'belonged', literature, throughout the 19th and much of the twentieth centuries was a key means through which Australians, so identified, could connect imaginatively and culturally with the imperial centre. As Leigh Dale writes of tertiary academics and students in Australia in the 19th century:

> tens of thousands of readers made the journey to England in their minds via the medium of literary texts. Perhaps readers experienced and believed the authority of this imagined place all the more powerfully for never having experienced it in its material form (Dale, 2012, p. 14)

As might be predicted, the imaginative location of colonial Australian consciousness and identity in England resulted in the suppression and rejection of locally produced literatures. Academics in tertiary institutions attempted to make and maintain their reputations by adhering closely to the teaching and scholarship of the British literary canon (Dale, 2012). This denouncement of Australian literature was, of course, not confined to the halls of the academy. In the 1940s, two Professors of English, G. H. Cowling from the University of Melbourne, and J. I. M Stewart, who was the Jury Professor of Language and Literature at Adelaide University, both engaged in public rejection of the emerging body of Australian literary texts. Cowling took his argument to the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* lamenting that:

> The rewards of literature in Australian are not good enough to attract the best minds…Good Australian novels that are entirely Australian are bound to be few… [and] Australian life is too lacking in tradition, and too confused, to make many first-class novels. (cited in McLean Davies, 2011, p. 131)

Stewart chose to distance himself from Australian literature, significantly and ironically, at the inaugural Commonwealth Literary Fund lecture on Australian literature. Acknowledging his gratitude to the "C. L. F. for providing the funds to give these lectures in Australian literature", Stewart explained that they had "neglected to provide any literature" and he would therefore "lecture on D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*" (cited in McLean Davies, 2011, p. 131).

This attitude towards Australian literature (understood at that time in a heterogeneous, colonial, masculine context) impacted the teaching of literature in

schools. Universities, well into the 20th century, set final examinations for senior secondary school students, and those teaching secondary school were prepared by University degrees that largely approached literature from a colonial standpoint. Yet, the influence of the 'cultural cringe' (Hesketh, 2013) against locally produced literature was not confined to secondary schools. Research into the *Victorian Readers*—a series of sequential books published from 1927 to 1930 and set at all elementary (Primary) schools in the state of Victoria until the 1960s—has shown that the overriding intention was for these texts to connect students (understood to be white) with an imperial heritage (Green & Beavis, 1996). This was summarised by the principles governing the series, which were outlined in the 8th book:

> The young readers were to begin at home, to be taken in imagination to various parts of the Empire, to Europe, and to the United States of America and thus gain knowledge of their rich heritage and acquire a well-founded pride of race. (Ministry of Education, 1928, qtd in Green & Beavis, 1996)

Although Australian literature did eventually make its way into the academy, and Chairs of Australian literature were established in some Universities, the presence of the national literature in schools remained minimal and often treated as an obligation. This is exemplified by statements made by the Chair of Australian Literature, professor Leonie Kramer, in the newly formed English teachers' journal *English in Australia* in 1967. Kramer argued for the importance of Australian literature despite its inferiority to other literatures:

> I am arguing that we ought to be prepared to distinguish between the values involved in reading the best literature from any country, and the values involved in reading the best literature of our own past which might, admittedly, not always or often measure up in quality to the best of other traditions (Kramer, 1967, p. 48)

This history of devaluing Australian literature has continued to bleed into the national consciousness and impact on the status of literature in schools. Recent criticism has argued for a move away from the idea of national literatures to a notion of global and comparative literature (Casanova, 2004; Martin & McLean Davies, 2017). National literatures have been discredited in the drive towards an understanding of literary production in the context of global literary systems and then partially rehabilitated in arguments around the Eurocentric or Westerncentric nature of the understanding and representation of the global (Shih, 2004). Australia both sits as part of the excluded minority: in its periphery, but also as integral to some of the disputed moments in the worlding of literature around centre-periphery Anglophone constructions (Cooppan, 2004; Giles, 2015; Morgan, 2019). In the contemporary context, then, Australian literature, in many school and University curricula, continues to be contested.

In 2008, in an attempt to address the status of Australian literature in the curriculum, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) introduced the mandatory teaching of Australian literature across the

years of schooling as part of Australia's first national English curriculum (Australian Curriculum & Reporting Authority, 2015). This introduction of the compulsory teaching of national literatures, particularly highlighting the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts, was part of a more general move to re-centre literature as part of the English curriculum (McLean Davies, Doecke, et al., 2018). Since the advent of multi-literacies into English pedagogy in the 1990s in Australia and internationally (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), particularly in settler colonial countries such as Canada and New Zealand, popular and media texts had been included in English, and reading expanded beyond the boundaries of canonical literary texts. The return of 'literature' as an organising category, rather than a subset of the more general category of texts, can thus be understood as a response to both anxiety about the perceived reduction of time spent on literature—however that may be defined—in primary and secondary English, and a particular concern about the fragile nature of Australian literature in the school curriculum.

Writing in 2009, Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman identified this concern, observing that:

> The last decade saw a number of politically conservative commentators routinely attack universities and academics for their apparent role in debasing traditional values of literary worth in favour of some sort of value-free approach to literary studies, and Australian literary studies in particular, where anything, it seems, goes. But it also saw these commentators lend their support to a shared sense of national literature, canonical as it might be, and to the need to make sure that the best of it continues to be read—and taught (Gelder & Salzman, 2009, p. 13)

Given the fraught history of the teaching of Australian literature, it is unsurprising that the controversial 2014 review of the national curriculum, led by the conservative government of the day, criticised the 'insistence' on Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts at the expense of "dealing with and introducing literature from the Western literary canon, especially poetry" (Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2014, p. 170). This resistance to national texts from writers of diverse backgrounds [sometimes covering 'uncomfortable' topics] means that when selecting and advocating for Australian literature, teachers often have to address inherited cultural concerns about literary quality, and insistence from the political right on the inclusion of colonial Australian texts which have clear links with Britain (AGDE, 2014).

As we reflect on the status of Australian literature in schools, and the way teachers are responding to and positioned by this mandate, it is worth considering the Australian approach in the context of the teaching of national literatures in other post-colonial countries. While Australia now mandates the teaching of Australian literature at all year levels, in Canada there is no national curriculum. Instead, Provincial governments are responsible for establishing the curriculum for their schools, and each province has its own, ministry-established common curriculum. The teaching of national literature varies between Provinces with some having Canadian literature as an essential part of the curriculum (British Columbia and Saskatchewan)

and others having almost no mention of Canadian texts in their curriculum (Swan, 2010). Like Australia, Canada historically taught British and American canonical texts in literature courses at secondary and tertiary level at the expense of national (Canadian) texts and those by Indigenous peoples (Brean, 2017). National literature in the Canadian context is also unsettled in primarily French-speaking parts of the country such as Quebec where curriculum and education systems have been complicated by the history of settlement and invasion under French colonial and then British colonial rule (Chapman, 2012). As early as 1999, while pushing for the inclusion of Canadian literature in the curriculum, Cynthia Chambers also pointed out the artificiality of the idea of a 'national literature' for a complex multi-ethnic, geographically diverse society like Canada's (Chambers, 1999, p. 140). In New Zealand, a national curriculum exists in which New Zealand literature is central to English: "The study of New Zealand and world literature contributes to students' developing sense of identity, their awareness of New Zealand's bicultural heritage, and their understanding of the world" (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2020, p. 18). Moreover, Maori culture is embedded within the curriculum for English and is guided by the Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Waitangi Tribunal and Treaty). In the Brazilian context, perceived potential for literature education to enable "self-recognition and politico-historical awareness" is complicated by a history of colonialism and political unrest and militarisation as well as multilingualism (Leahy-Dios, 1997, p. 121). Currently in the secondary context or *ensino médio* in Brazil, both Portuguese and Brazilian literature are core subjects (Fritzen, 2018). These different approaches to national literatures within school curriculum further highlight the complex and contested nature of the teaching of literature in national contexts, and enable us to identify common challenges, but also draw attention to the specificity of the Australian situation, which we will discuss in more detail below.

Teaching Australia project

Motivated by our understanding of the complexity and history of teaching Australian literature in schools, in 2016–2017, we undertook the *Teaching Australia* pilot project. Funded by the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund, this project focussed on the ways that teachers were including Australian literature in their classrooms. While much research into the teaching and selection of literature focusses on text lists and curriculum documents, this project offered new insight into texts actually used in classrooms. We were particularly interested in the early and middle years of secondary school, because this is where teachers have the greatest autonomy with regard to text selection. In this way, data from this pilot project offer insights into conversations about text selection, which tend to focus on the senior years of secondary education (Bliss & Bacalja, 2020; Martin & McLean Davies, 2017; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2018; Mead et al., 2010; Peel et al., 2000).

The *Teaching Australia* project was founded on a series of questions, including:

1. What constitutes Australian literature or an Australian text under the national curriculum?

2. What is the purpose (stated and unstated) and contemporary value of teaching Australian literature?
3. How can the teaching of Australian literature be best supported and facilitated?

Two core dimensions of this project enabled us to address these questions: workshops with English teachers (which we have reported on in McLean Davies et al. 2017) and a national survey of English teachers which focussed on texts taught in years 7–10 (11–16 years old). The results of this survey are used in the following discussion. Previously, the only survey to focus on the teaching of Australian literature in schools was conducted as part of the *Teaching Australian Literature* (*TAL*) project which largely focussed on the tertiary sector but gathered feedback from 25 senior secondary teachers about their pedagogical approach to Australian literature and text selection (Mead et al., 2010).

Our project seeks to explore the conceptions and practices of Australian English teachers in the secondary context. The *Teaching Australia pilot* project survey ran from 1 October 2016 until 20 December 2016 (11 weeks). The survey was promoted nationally and drew 210 responses from English teachers. The voluntary nature of the survey meant that respondents were generally interested in and engaging with issues of teaching Australian literature in their classrooms (i.e. this was a self-selecting cohort)—these data therefore do not offer a systematic or comprehensive insight into teaching Australian literature, or in the context of practice: this needs to be taken up with a larger sample size in further research. However the sample size, which is similar to or exceeding that of other surveys in the field or English teaching in Australia (see Mead et al., 2010; Manuel et al., 2019), is not insubstantial and data from this project have enabled us to identify some of the priorities and challenges for teaching Australian literature, and the range of national identities and imaginaries that the selection of texts was animating at this time.

Given the concerns of this paper regarding the kinds of Australian national identity being explored through literature, and the stories and voices that are given priorities in classrooms, we will focus here on the responses provided by teachers to the following questions:

- What Australian literature are you teaching?
- What factors contribute to your selection of Australian texts?
- What do you consider to be the value of teaching Australian texts?
- Should Australian literature be mandated in the curriculum?

In response to the questions about Australian texts taught, 103 respondents identified 401 titles. Two hundred and seventy of the titles were listed only once, indicating the considerable breadth and diversity of offerings of Australian literature taught in the secondary years. Some titles were predictably repeated and are worth further consideration. The top ten most popular responses (22% of the identified set texts) from teachers are included in Table 1.

This list of texts provides an interesting snapshot of the variety of Australian texts being taught by teachers who are interested in being part of a conversation about Australian literature, and offers us the opportunity to consider the way the teaching

Table 1 Australian texts being taught by teachers who responded to the survey

Title	Number of times listed	Author	Date published	Year level taught
Jasper Jones	16	Craig Silvey	2009	9/10
Tomorrow When the War Began	15	John Marsden	1993	7/8 (five responses) 9/10 (10 responses)
The Happiest Refugee	12	Anh Do	2010	7/8 (two responses) 9/10 (10 responses)
Deadly Unna	9	Phillip Gwynne	1998	9/10 (seven responses) 7/8 (one response) 11/12 (one response)
Rabbit Proof Fence	8	Phillip Noyce	2002	7/8 (5 responses) 9/10 (3 responses)
Looking for Alibrandi	8	Melina Marchetta	1992	7/8 (1 response) 9/10 (7 responses)
Boy Overboard	7	Morris Gleitzman	2002	7/8
Growing up Asian in Australia	7	Alice Pung Ed	2008	10/11
Blueback	6	Tim Winton	1997	7/8
Dark Roots	6	Cate Kennedy	2008	11/12

of Australian literature is supporting or contesting particular national identities. All ten of these texts have been published or produced in recent decades and all but *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Jasper Jones* represent contemporary experience. Six of the top ten texts, including the top five most set texts, are by male authors with only four of the texts on this list authored by women, although Alice Pung's anthology *Growing up Asian in Australia* includes stories from both male and female writers. One of the male-authored texts (Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began*) has a primary female protagonist. The one text containing a primary female protagonist and written by a woman (Marchetta's *Looking for Alibrandi*) is also one of the oldest texts, from 1992. The Noyce film *Rabbit Proof Fence*—which has female protagonists—is an adaptation of a female-authored Indigenous text, Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*. However, there is no text written or produced by an Indigenous person on this list. While Gwynne's *Deadly Unna* and Silvey's *Jasper Jones*[2] have central Aboriginal characters, these texts present a white view of Indigenous peoples and issues and might be seen as offering 'access' via a white juvenile point of view to an implied reader. While only one text listed is a film (*Rabbit Proof Fence*), four of the other books (*Jasper Jones, Tomorrow When the War Began, Looking for Alibrandi, Deadly Unna*) now have film adaptations and audio

[2] It is important to note here that the film adaptation of *Jasper Jones* was released in 2017, after the date of the survey so teachers here are referring to Silvey's book rather than the adaptation by Indigenous Director Rachel Perkins, which would have different implications and perspectives for teaching in classrooms.

book versions which can complement and support the teaching of the texts, indicating this is a key consideration at this stage of schooling for teachers.

This list indicates that issues of migration and migrant experience feature prominently on the top ten text list with *Looking for Alibrandi, The Happiest Refugee*, *Boy Overboard*, and *Growing Up Asian in Australia* all presenting migrant stories. All can be seen to address racial and ethnic difference and intolerance. In this regard, this top ten list shows a broadening of text choices from earlier periods, such as the 1960s and 1970s where texts by and about white authors unequivocally dominated text choices (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2018). The other key themes that emerge from this list are coming of age or bildungsroman, and rurality. The notion of students being able to identify with a protagonist and literature serving as a moral guide was a strong driver identified by teachers in the qualitative responses around text choice. We take this driver to be in operation here offering a strong rationale in text selection for teachers. We posit that the 'implied' student whose identification with the protagonist is secured is white and male; this comes from our literary analysis of the texts according to character and theme (Bliss & Bacalja, 2020), and also the context in which it is taught, where engagement of boys with reading in adolescence remains a significant priority in schools (Martino, 2001; McDonald, 2019). Eight of the ten texts deal at least substantively with teenage protagonists and the texts with strong first-person narration are mostly by male authors. There is also strong representation of rural or country Australia in the contemporary texts listed (*Jasper Jones, Blueback, Tomorrow When the War Began, Rabbit Proof Fence*). This prominence is especially interesting given that most Australian students live in cities. We might ask if this is an echo or extension of the enduring bush myth, which suggests that the 'true Australia' is to be found in its rural and remote regions. Despite the fact that the Australian population has been primarily urban since the 1860s, with most people living in larger towns and cities, there has been an ongoing cultural investment in rural tropes based around the environment and rural workers. As outlined by various critics, this myth has endured and adapted across the centuries since white settlement (Davison & Brodie, 2005; Nicoll, 2001; Turner, 1993). Regardless of or because of its flexibility, which may incorporate Indigenous and non-white characters, including women, the myth tends to reinforce versions of white, heteronormative masculine occupation of an Australian interior figured as innately hostile and challenging (Schaffer, 1988). It may be for this latter reason that rural texts are not seen as inconsistent with the imperative for reader identification with protagonists.

Although this list of top ten texts cannot be used to provide a comprehensive outline of the way in which the nation is being created and presented in classrooms across the country, it suggests possible priorities for teachers and students, including the representation of migrant experience in a strongly immigrant country. This list also shows that direct Indigenous experience is underrepresented, in that when it does feature, it is mediated by white authors/directors, although the inclusion of these texts may also indicate a desire or perceived need to somehow include Indigenous life experience.

Responses received regarding the factors that contribute to teachers' selection of Australian texts further illuminate the kinds of priorities that are guiding text

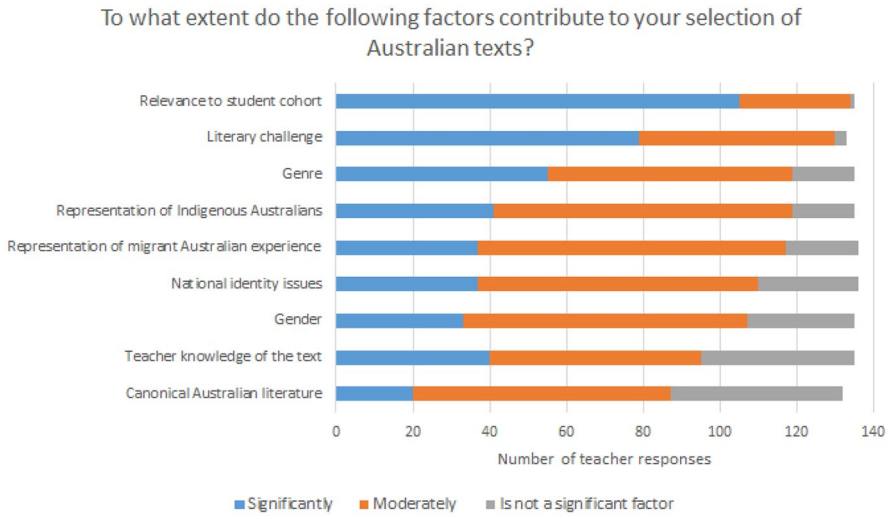

Fig. 1 Factors contributing to selection of Australian texts

selection in the compulsory years of schooling. The survey asked participants to identify the extent to which factors (listed by the researchers) influenced their selection of Australian texts. These factors and the responses are collated in Fig. 1.

These responses reveal perceived relevance to the lives of students ('relevance to student cohort') as the most significant consideration for the selection of Australian texts by the surveyed teachers, one which we relate to the consideration of students' capacity to identify with the characters or situation. Given the analysis of the texts that are most-often selected, above, it is possible to begin to build a profile of the imagined student/s, and the kinds of issues and concerns that are deemed 'relevant' for these implied reader/s. While the chart above shows gender to be of moderate concern to most respondents, responses to the previous question suggest that the students being catered for in text selection are primarily male and white but may also be males or females who have experienced, or are close to the experience of, migration. The other key criteria identified as significant to text selection is 'literary challenge'—a term that is likely to have different meanings in different contexts. By showing that participants rank literary challenge ahead of the other factors, such as gender and Indigenous and migrant issues, data from this question suggest, echoing Leonie Kramer cited earlier, that political and national considerations for teaching Australian literature are distinct from and exclusive of considerations of quality and student relevance.

Teachers were then asked to comment on what they thought is the purpose or value of teaching Australian texts. The methodology used to analyse these responses was close language analysis—this enabled the emergence rather than imposition of key entities and concepts (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018). To this end, responses were coded initially according to the repetition of terms such as 'identity' 'access' or 'understanding' and the collocation of words with these high-frequency terms

(McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018). Through this process, three key themes were identified:

- Creating a national identity or 'voice'.
- Relevance to students' lives.
- Building and understanding community/supporting multiculturalism.

Interestingly, while teachers did not rate 'national identity issues' as a significant factor in their selection of Australian texts in the previous question, here, many teachers felt that the value of Australian literature was in its capacity to give or create a distinct (and homogeneous) Australian identity. Teacher respondents noted this in various ways:

> It is important to hear the Australian 'voice' and for students to be able to connect with issues raised in Australian texts.

> [Reading Australian Literature enables] [p]reservation of a cultural identity and building understanding of issues and values that are important to us.

This idea of a distinctly Australian identity is also conveyed in those responses which focussed on the relevance of Australian literature to students' lives and experiences. Respondents saw the role of Australian literature as enabling students to:

> more easily make connections to texts, to themselves, their community, and their place in the world.

> See their own society through a different lens, and, in some cases, an aspect of their society that they didn't know existed. Sometimes they also see themselves represented.

Teachers also identified Australian literature's role in helping students understand not only their own culture and identity, but also in building community ties and supporting multiculturalism. Australian texts enable students to:

> explore and value the diversity and the representations of people with whom we share a community, country and world. It represents our cultural identity and context" and gain exposure to "the multitude of voices in Australian culture and contribute to our understanding of the ideologies that are both dominant and marginalised.

These responses reveal that the perceived value and purpose of Australian literature includes not only the revelation and bolstering of identity and culture within the nation but also has impact outside of Australia's geographic borders for many teachers, with Australian literature helping teachers and students to think about Australia's place in the world.

Significantly, only one respondent cited Indigenous voices and stories as a key part of the 'value' of Australian literature in answer to this question. This may appear in contradistinction to the responses to the question reported on in Fig. 1, where 40% of teachers selected 'Representation of Indigenous Australians' as a significant

factor in their text selection practices; however, it is worth observing the different framing of these questions. When presented with prompts to the role of Indigenous and migrant writers in their classroom, teachers affirm this as a priority; however, in the free text response, which does not guide participants thinking, only one respondent raised Indigenous texts as a priority with regard to Australian identity and culture. Further, responses to this survey item suggest that teachers are more actively engaging with migrant texts and stories than they are with Indigenous texts in their classrooms. There is also an interesting paradox in this set of answers, around the role of literature in relation to national identity, where the teachers identified both the need for recognition and reinforcement of a national self, and simultaneously, the need for challenge or expansion of the idea of that national self—the 'aspect of their society that they didn't know existed'. There is perhaps a limit on the extent of challenge or misrecognition allowed, which might explain that for the implied white male young adult reader, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life and issues are deemed more recognisable as self when mediated through a white male lens, and with the provision of a white male young adult protagonist with whom to identify. Walton et al. suggest that the Australian national subject produced and reinforced in increasingly diverse schools remains a white subject, and that whiteness is largely unexamined (Walton et al., 2018).

Our survey explicitly asked teachers: 'The Australian Curriculum: English mandates the teaching of Australian literature at each year level. What is your view on this?' Answers were given on a Likert scale. The large majority of teachers agreed with the mandating of Australian literature in the curriculum (103 respondents or 76%), with only 10 respondents (7%) disagreeing with the mandate. Twenty-two teachers were unsure about the mandating of Australian texts in the curriculum (16%). Interestingly, 21% of the teachers who agreed with the mandate to teach Australian literature at each year level sought to qualify their answer, for example:

> While I appreciate that it is important to have Australian literature in the curriculum, I also value the exposure of a number of texts and cultural backgrounds for the students. I find that Australian texts are often very similar and this limits the number of themes and ideas the students are exposed to over the course of their education.
>
> I completely agree with this mandate and do my best to ensure that we follow it in our school. It is, however, quite challenging to find texts that are Australian, have literary and thematic value and are appropriate for the year levels and abilities for which we need to cater at our school.

What is striking about this feedback is that while these teachers believe that the teaching of Australian literature is important and necessary for their students, their responses imply that Australian literature is generally homogenous, of less literary value, or of poorer quality than texts from other nations. That is—students should be taught Australian literature *in spite* of its perceived inferiority, linking back to the ideas of J. I. M Stewart, G. H. Cowling and Leonie Kramer regarding the status of Australian literature.

The value of teaching Australian texts is, for Kramer, in what those texts might teach students about their country and themselves. Australian literature, while poor

in quality, can help to combat the "remoteness" (Kramer, 1967, p. 49) Australian students may face, as well as encouraging "writing…reading…[and] intelligent activity" (Kramer, 1967, p. 51). For the contemporary teachers who completed the online survey for the project, the opportunities presented by Australian literature were similar, with relevance to student cohort, personal and community history, and identity key to the setting of Australian texts. However, like Kramer, a proportion of these teachers lamented the perceived poor quality and lack of variety of Australian literature.

Looking forward with Australian literature

While a single survey cannot capture all Australian English teachers' attitudes towards Australian literature, these data do reveal key insights for educators. Although is it clear that teachers are no longer orienting cultural imagination to an imperial centre, and a greater diversity of texts are being taught in the junior and middle years of schooling than in the senior years, the lack of Indigenous narratives and under representation of women's voices indicate further work needs to be done to ensure that a range of stories and voices are encountered in classrooms. These pilot data and our analysis also open up issues for further consideration, such as how we address teachers' lingering concerns about the 'quality' of Australian literature, which is distinct to debates about the relative qualities of Young Adult fiction and literary works. Our survey showed that teachers had concerns about the literariness of texts because they were Australian, a general concern which was not animated in conjunction with texts from the United Kingdom or North America. We also might ask how existing resources which support the teaching of diverse Australian texts, such as those provided by online sites like *Austlit* and *Reading Australia* might be better utilised. The responses provided by teachers reveal that while contestation around the nature and value of Australian literature is ongoing, there is simultaneously a hunger from English teachers to engage more effectively with Australian literature in their classrooms. The teachers involved in our project were broadly supportive of the aims of the project and interested in the teaching of Australian texts; however, their varied views about the value and pedagogical potential of Australian texts reveal that work is still needed to effectively embed Australian literature in schools.

The *Teaching Australia* project also revealed teachers' complex relationship to the idea of a national literature for Australia. This survey was undertaken prior to recent high profile political and cultural events which amplified discussions of race relations and inequality in Australia and globally and which has bolstered demand for and engagement with diverse stories. As we also noted, there has been an increase in the last few years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts in prominent national literary prizes. Further research is needed to indicate whether these developments will filter into teaching practices in schools. While the Australian curriculum provides some rationale for the mandating of Australian literature across the compulsory years of schooling, it is apparent that much greater discussion and debate about the nature, value and purpose of Australian literature is needed if teachers are to

reconcile the responsibility to teach national texts, with the imperative for teaching English for personal growth, which in Australia has oriented students towards texts set outside Australia for more than sixty years (McLean Davies, Buzacott, et al., 2018). Literary challenge must be seen as something that is part of the field of Australian writing, and the apparent white masculine Anglophile assumptions regarding 'relevance' contested and reviewed. Challenging these assumptions is central to the work that teachers in both secondary and tertiary contexts must do and is the ongoing work of literary studies, teacher education and teachers who are, in their classrooms, shaping the future citizens of Australia and the world.

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Larissa McLean Davies is a Professor and is recognised for research combining English education and literary studies through a body of publications on literary knowledge, text selection, curriculum and the teaching of Australian literature. She is also the lead Chief Investigator of the ARC Discovery Project *Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers*. She is regularly invited to deliver national and international keynote addresses on topics related to these research areas.

Susan K. Martin is Professor in English and has recognised expertise in 19th-century Australian literature and reading cultures and technologies, in research that traverses secondary and tertiary contexts. She has also published widely on gender studies and theory, spatial theory and garden history/culture.

Lucy Buzacott is a Research Manager at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. She currently manages the *Literary Education Lab* and the ARC-funded project *Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers* as well as contributing to projects related to national literatures, literary knowledge and English curriculum.