



# Colonial texts on Aboriginal land: the dominance of the canon in Australian English classrooms

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## Abstract

From its conception in Australia, subject ‘English’ has been considered central to the curriculum. The English literature strand in the curriculum does not stipulate specific texts but is more explicit regarding what should be considered as an appropriate ‘literary text’. Curriculum documents emphasise the need for texts to have cultural and aesthetic value whilst suggesting that English teachers include texts that are chosen by students, texts from Asia, and texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors. Despite this, the influences of British colonisation manifests in Australian English teachers’ text selection as they continue to choose texts from the ‘canon’. This paper is framed by Rigney’s principles of Indigenism and Indigenous Standpoint Theory (1999; 2017) and will draw on my own lived experience—as an Aboriginal student, English teacher, and now researcher—to examine the presence of colonialism in English and the consequent subordination of Indigenous perspectives. This paper will suggest some of the ramifications of prioritising colonial texts while teaching and learning on Aboriginal land and investigate how the construction of subject English could feel assimilative to Indigenous people. I will explore this by using my own experience of learning William Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’ as a student and of teaching Doris Pilkington’s ‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence’ as a teacher as examples.

**Keywords** English · Text selection · Canon · Indigenous literature · Indigenous education · Indigenist research

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## Introduction

In education, despite the scientific evidence that proves Indigenous Australians (respectfully also referred to as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and First Nations peoples interchangeably henceforth) have the world's oldest living cultures (Johnston et al., 1998; Martin, 2007; Rose, 2019; West, 2000), Indigenous perspectives have had to fight for their position in the curriculum (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Phillips, 2012). Because of this, it is important to challenge how the privileging of British colonial ideals associated with a so-called 'postcolonial' approach to Indigenous education has perpetuated colonial policy, discrimination, injustice, assimilation, and dispossession (Ardill, 2013). As an example, in subject 'English', when contemplating teachers' text selection, ideological shifts and cultural studies have challenged assumptions about what 'counts' as text (Eagleton, 1983, 1985; Goodson & Medway, 1990; Scholes, 1998). Traditionally, the classically accepted body of literary works of the 'canon' are selected due to their supposed value based on genre, style, skill, and general 'literary merit' (Hateley, 2013). However, there is a saturation of privilege in these texts and the social hierarchies created by upholding the definition of 'canonical literature' (where Whiteness is presumed to be attached to literary merit) have been critiqued (Hateley, 2013). The 'modern canon' has been a contentious issue as, historically, privileged sociocultural groups, including homogenised presentations of religion, nationality, sexuality, gender, race, and class, are at the forefront of what defines 'canonicity' (Guillory, 1993; Lauter, 1983). The perceived lack of objectivity when it comes to texts being upheld for supposed 'cultural' and 'literary' value has been questioned due to their consistent alignment with and maintenance of Eurocentric social power and agency (Hateley, 2013).

This paper, written by a Mandandanji researcher, is framed by the principles of Indigenism and Indigenous Standpoint Theory, in order to signify and legitimise the value of my own knowledge production as both an Indigenous researcher and educator, as I bring my own lived experience into this space as a form of resistance and emancipation (Rigney, 1999, 2017). To do this, I will examine the presence of colonialism in English and the consequent subordination of Indigenous perspectives. This paper will outline possible ramifications caused by prioritising colonial texts, such as 'Othello' by William Shakespeare, while teaching and learning on Aboriginal land. I will investigate how my own learning experience suggests the construction of subject English can feel assimilative. Additionally, the benefits of teaching Indigenous literature, such as Doris Pilkington's 'Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence', will be offered based on observations from my teaching experience. Discussions such as this allow for the questioning of the racialised social and systemic colonial structures that impact Indigenous students, and advocates for authentic moves towards reconciliation to be made and for education to be made free of racism. Ultimately, this paper seeks to interrogate how English teachers are influenced in their perceptions of literature to highlight how they may be inadvertently subscribing to an idea that arbitrarily confers colonial social agency and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164).

## Background

### Positioning of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous students

Due to the ongoing ramifications of colonisation, it is acknowledged that Indigenous knowledge, and its classification as legitimate, is still arguing for its place in schools (McLaughlin et al., 2012; Phillips, 2012). However, curriculum providers and authorities continue to make efforts to ensure Indigenous perspectives are embedded in more meaningful ways (ACARA, 2012 in McLaughlin et al., 2012). For Indigenous students though, exposure to unacceptable levels of systematic harm within schools continues to be reported (Bishop, 2021). Schools are presented as a vehicle of obtaining a 'good education', meaning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may feel coerced into complying with practices of assimilation, indoctrination, and institutionalisation (Bishop, 2021), and Indigenous identities may be viewed as homogenised (Rowse, 2009). This paper, therefore, like others (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016), calls for an examination of the interaction and manifestation of historical and current trends of racism in schooling, evidenced by the complicit nature of teachers' literary text choices and their prioritisation of the canon. Attempts at addressing racism are evident through the various constructions of the Australian Curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum is a site where culture-based content, which has been added in an attempt to remedy inequities faced by diverse groups, appears to equally address the views, perspectives, and interests of both the government and Indigenous peoples (Bell, 2004; Salter & Maxwell, Salter and Maxwell, 2016; Maxwell et al., 2018). The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) arranged the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cross Curriculum Priority (CCP) content into three key knowledge categories: Culture; People; and Country and Place. Referred to by Lowe and Galstaun (2020) as 'seductively simple', the consequent content in these areas could undermine students' and teachers' ability to comprehend that Indigenous peoples are faced with socio-political controls. ACARA (2011 in Maxwell et al., 2018) believes the CCP 'will allow all young Australians the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torre Strait Islander histories and cultures, their significance for Australia and the impact these have had, and continue to have, on our world'.

It is, therefore, essential that Indigenous peoples' experiences, and our relational dimensions, are discussed in a way that show how we stem from, but are not limited to, the past (Phillips & Lampert, 2012). By teaching Indigenous content in a multidimensional way (such as through sharing stories of lived experience available through literature), students can understand our ways of being and knowing while comprehending the impact of colonisation and non-Indigenous ways in both past and present contexts; this allows them to engage with truth telling about our multidimensional and intersected history (Phillips & Lampert, 2012). Indigenous identities and voices need to be promoted within educational institutions in order to foster respect and acceptance (Bodkin-Andrews &

Carlson, 2016). It is only through strength-based approaches that the impact of racism can be addressed in a way that moves beyond problematic constructions of 'Pan-Indigeneity' (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). This paper argues for strength-based practices, such as privileging Indigenous voices through literature, as Indigenous education is not only for the benefit of Indigenous students, but all Australians.

### **Indigenous education is for everyone**

Price's (2019) 'windows and mirrors' concept—where teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content provides 'windows' for non-Indigenous students into a culture different from their own and 'mirrors' for Indigenous students to see themselves reflected in their classroom—holistically addresses the relevance of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures for all students. Meaningfully embedding Indigenous perspectives, in an increasingly racist climate (Price, 2019), is a necessity for non-Indigenous students as it enables them to build a deeper understanding of the interconnections between Indigenous people and their own culture and history (Phillips, 2012, p. 22). For Indigenous students, including Indigenous perspectives allows us to build upon our own cultural worldview and prevents assimilation into the dominant framework (Phillips, 2012, p. 22). Teachers need to understand their roles as knowledge producers and cultural actors, as their own conceptions of diversity can cause students who do not feel a sense of belonging within the dominant normative culture to continue to be disadvantaged (Phillips, 2012). Vass (2012) sets the challenge for all teachers to respond to Moreton-Robinson's conception (2004, p. 88) that Whiteness has shaped knowledge production. Self-reflexive critique is needed regarding how teachers engage in racialisation processes and their understanding of how racialised positioning and perspectives impact education. Reflexivity would transform Indigenous education by challenging the dominant discourses of power, position, and perspectives in Australia while moving away from deficit paradigms (Vass, 2012, p.94). In line with this call to action, I argue that it is essential to be informed by an Indigenous Standpoint that highlights the power of literature to either subordinate or uplift Indigenous perspectives.

### **Positionality, Indigenism, and Indigenous standpoint theory**

As a Mandandanji woman, who is a descendant of both the colonised and the coloniser, I feel compelled to contribute to the field of educational research which continues to be dominated by non-Indigenous scholars. As an Aboriginal young person, I struggled to locate authentic representations of my identity in my English classroom. As an English teacher, I endeavoured to ensure my own teaching programs reflected the complexity of Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledges. Now, as an Indigenous Education researcher, I am determined to ensure my research privileges Indigenous voices and experiences and disrupts coloniality. Due to my own family's experience with forced segregation

then assimilation, I knew my research would always be informed by my Aboriginality, as I want my research to be my form of resistance and be emancipatory (Rigney, 2017).

'Indigenism' is research that aims to privilege the development of 'more progressive kinds of knowledge seeking methods that privilege the diversity of Indigenous experiences' (Rigney, 2017, p. 37). As an English teacher-come-researcher who witnessed the pushback to the change in English curricula due to negative attitudes, I believe it is important to lean into Indigenism. This type of research allows for Aboriginal peoples' individual lived experiences to be presented as we advocate for Indigenous interests, realities, and aspirations. (Rigney, 2017, p. 39). It also both acknowledges and celebrates the diversity of Indigenous peoples' experiences. Indigenous Standpoint Theory (IST) resists the common experience that Indigenous peoples encounter when encouraged to embrace a 'western, ethnocentric research methodology that is culturally remote and often unacceptable to the Indigenous epistemological approach to knowledge' (Foley, 2003, p. 1). Embracing my own 'Indigenous standpoint' is an empowering way to signify and legitimise the value of my own knowledge production as both an Indigenous researcher and educator as I bring my own lived experience into this space as a form of resistance and emancipation (Rigney, 2017).

IST research is driven by Rigney's three principles for Indigenist research:

- A) Resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research (Rigney, 2017, p. 42).
- B) Political integrity in Indigenist research (Rigney, 2017, p. 43).
- C) Privileging Indigenous voices in research (Rigney, 2017, p. 44).

Through embracing my Indigenous standpoint, this paper begins to address and disrupt the rhetoric of assimilation and Whiteness that lingers in the construction of subject English as a form of resistance and a way of advocating for the privileging of Indigenous voices. My research will always be informed by my desire to liberate students from colonial dominance in English classrooms. This is informed by my lived experience of being an Indigenous student and teacher in English classrooms that were dominated by prevailing narratives of literary merit and culture presumed to be attached to Whiteness. Through engaging in this research, I can also be part of the scholarship that emphasises the political integrity and importance of Indigenous peoples as sovereign First Nations Australians.

Before discussing the teaching and learning of colonial versus Indigenous texts in Australian English classrooms, it is important to address how subject English has developed and been critiqued and what impacts a teachers' text selection. This will provide insight into canonisation and normative teaching practices that impact Indigenous students and wider socio-political onto-epistemologies.

## Analysis

### Historical developments and critiques of subject 'English'

From its conception in Australia, subject English has been considered central to the curriculum (Macintyre, 2001) and its primary focus described as the 'close study of literary works and the nurturing of students' responses to them' (Rosser, 2002, p. 91). Over time, curriculum changes have historically been centred around issues pertaining to the identity of the canon, nature, and place; literature as a cultural phenomenon (Eagleton, 1983; Williams, 1958); how literature is read and what is classified as a response or reading (Belsey, 1980; Culler, 1983; Rosenblatt, 1978); and how teaching literature has purpose for society as well as students individually (Hunter, 1988; Leavis & Thompson, 1933; Mathieson, 1975). However, in the post-war world, the English curriculum began to engage more with media and popular culture and connect with the language and life of students (Yiannakis, 2014). Whilst some were thrilled and others alarmed, in the 1960s and 1970s, 'new English' began to arise and the 'civilising mission' of English was being phased out and replaced with promoting personal experiences with the worlds of texts (Yiannakis, 2014). Consequently, the curriculum has been questioned as ideological shifts and cultural studies have challenged assumptions about the nature of literature and what is considered a text worthy of study (Eagleton, 1983, 1985; Goodson & Medway, 1990; Scholes, 1998). With this, the certainties of linguistic and literary heritage were challenged (Beavis, 2002). The continually contested aims and content of this subject has proven that English is not as singular or stable as some may assume (Cormack, 2004), evident in the discussion that followed the emergence of a National Curriculum.

The content of English curriculums across Australia, including the new national curriculum, has been condemned by some for allegedly being 'dumbed-down' in a context of falling standards (Yiannakis, 2014). When designing the curriculum, curriculum writers had to negotiate the types of knowledges they believed were necessary for all Australian students (McLean Davies & Sawyer, 2018). When English was 'reshaped' into the Language, Literature, and Literacy strands, it reflected the desires of many to re-calibrate the key knowledge-based domains (Doecke et al., 2018). Although this construction may have made the domains more palatable, there are still many points of contestation within these three strands, particularly for what constitutes literature. What is considered literature worthy of study has become a central discussion impacting the genealogy of English as a classroom discipline. Canonisation and its impact on the assumed stability of English in Australian education is important to consider as the dominance of the 'canon' and its ties to colonial representations arguably subordinates marginalised voices, that could be heard if more diverse texts were studied.

### Construction of literature within the English curriculum—questioning the 'canon'

Based on my experiences as a student and teacher, I argue that the influences of British colonisation manifests in the text selection process of English teachers in Australia as they are still influenced by the 'canon'. The classically accepted body of

literary works known as the ‘canon’ are selected due to their supposed value based on genre, style, skill, and general ‘literary merit’ (Hateley, 2013). Despite the desire to perpetuate the canon, inclusivity of the evolving standards of what constitutes a ‘classic’ are contested; however, this shifting definition is required to accommodate for the educational needs of the next generation (Lundin, 2004).

In recent times, the social hierarchies created by upholding the definition of ‘canonical literature’ have been critiqued (Hateley, 2013). Cultural ideals and social norms have influenced canon formation for decades (Hateley, 2013). Recently, the ‘modern canon’ has been a contentious issue as constructions of canonicity have historically included particular presentations of religion, nationality, sexuality, gender, race, and class; critics noted the prevalence of the privileged within these sociocultural categories in what we are led to believe are texts worthy of study (Guillory, 1993; Lauter, 1983). Social power and agency are maintained, with a lack of objectivity, as texts are labelled as having ‘cultural’ and ‘literary’ value (Hateley, 2013) and ‘canons’ are still upheld.

It is important for English teachers to be aware of how the canon, and its powerful position within the curriculum, mediates text choice (Hateley, 2013). If English teachers are influenced to see literature in a certain way, they may comply with a system that withholds or arbitrarily confers social agency and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 164). In saying this, it is not appropriate to engage entirely with either rejection or acceptance of canonical logic. Instead, it is more productive for English teachers to be aware of the impacts of canonicity and engage with this critically (Hateley, 2013). Similarly, as argued by Beavis (2001), English teachers must be aware of how these shifting constructions of the canon may influence their own subtext and text choices, and whether they are allowing colonial representations to dominate and Indigenous perspectives to be subordinated.

### **What impacts a teacher’s text selection? Has Australia’s text selection changed over time?**

English teachers’ text selection may be influenced by their own beliefs about subject English (Hastie & Sharplin, 2012). Many believe English has a duty to study ‘great literary works’ to enhance national solidarity and shape students’ morality (Ball et al., 1990; Hastie & Sharplin, 2012). Teachers who align with this discourse believe it is important students be exposed to canonical texts that they deem to be quality literature (Beavis, 2000; Ryan, 2000). Pressures that stem from what schools and parents consider ‘good literature’ also impact teachers’ choices (Ivey, 1999; Worthy et al., 1999). Hastie and Sharplin’s (2012) study suggests that English teachers are influenced by their own beliefs, school context, and student engagement but mandated curriculum documents were found to have minimal impact on their text choices.

English has progressively shifted from the ‘study of culture’ to ‘cultural studies’ (Patterson, 2011). It was assumed by many that this would change what texts would be studied (Yiannakis, 2014). When examining reading lists in Australian literature courses between 1945 and 2005, Yiannakis (2014) found that despite the changes to

English curriculum, there was still a dominance of writers from England. Authors that were dominant in reading lists in 1945, such as Shakespeare, Hardy, Chaucer, and Conrad, were still present in 2005. Australia has undergone a cultural and political evolution since 1945 and English has changed its course structures, examinations, and syllabi across the country, impacting pedagogical and theoretical practices (Yiannakis, 2014). Despite this, text selection has not been impacted significantly as a core group of writers and their texts have remained ever present since World War Two (Yiannakis, 2014). This brings into question the place of Australian literature and what is considered Australian ‘heritage’ in English and what this suggests to students about Indigenous peoples’ positioning.

### **What is the place of ‘Australian’ literature and ‘heritage’ in the English curriculum?**

When formulating their teaching approach, English teachers may cling to ‘traditional’ practices; in previous instalments of English curriculums, texts were set predominately from the canon, largely with English heritage (Beavis, 2001). There has been a renewed policy commitment in the development of English in the Australian Curriculum regarding the role of literature (Doecke et al., 2011, 2018). As a result, there has been a push for texts and text types to range more widely and to include more Australian works (Beavis, 2001).

Australian literature is unsurprisingly mandated across the compulsory years of schooling as literature has been considered a way to contest or establish national cultures and to negotiate or reinforce national identity (McLean Davies et al., 2017). When reviewing how much ‘Australian’ literature is taught in Australian English classrooms, it is essential to question why certain texts are chosen for study. Phillips (2012) asserts that, as only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups could plausibly claim a non-migrant history in Australia, the understanding of Australian culture needs to be reconstituted through including historical experiences and knowledge of ‘Other’ cultures, particularly Indigenous cultures. This perspective made me consider why colonial portrayals of ‘otherness’ are continually chosen above stories by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and how this impacts Indigenous teachers and students of subject English, such as myself.

### **Discussion—two examples**

#### **As a student—learning ‘Othello’**

When I was in high school, my English education was dominated by canonical texts. Of Shakespeare’s plays, I studied three which were selected based on the ‘cultural’ and ‘literary’ merit criteria that the English curriculum called for. However, it was when we were taught ‘Othello’ in my senior years that I realised something had been omitted until now, and that was race. ‘Othello’ was included in a unit that ‘dealt’ with racism as a ‘theme’ and I was troubled by the fact that we were being taught *about* race through a text written by a White man, *about* race, with no story that



shared the lived experience of racism, just the appropriated and imagined experience produced through Shakespeare's main character.

As an Aboriginal student, I knew my families' stories of the racism they had been subjected to. It was something that was *lived*, not just written about. Being the only Aboriginal student in my English classroom, I wondered if anyone else had questioned the idea that racism was a 'theme to study' rather than something to critically discuss or engage with from a story of live -experience. This is what I was missing as an Aboriginal student when I had to learn *about* racism, from the lens of a White English man, when there are stories regarding the lived experience of racism by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors that could allow for a windows and mirrors experience (Price, 2019) to take place.

Discussing why such texts like 'Othello' are chosen in contemporary Australian classrooms is imperative to understanding how subject English can feel assimilative to Indigenous peoples. I am not alone in my concern regarding Shakespeare's work and his writing of the Black experience. Smith (2016) highlights that Shakespeare's work, that has been brought forward through time, allows for 'Blackness' to function 'too easily as the mark of unassailable difference' (p. 108). As it is written by a White man, and valued for its 'literary' and 'cultural' value, privileging this colonial text above the voices of Indigenous Australians continues the subordination of Indigenous perspectives on a pertinent topic, such as racism, and could make subjects like English feel assimilative to Aboriginal students. The colonial representation of race means that, under the guise of making the English classroom more diverse through a text's characters, teachers are instead perpetuating damaging colonial portrayals of 'otherness', subordinating marginalised voices and representations. We, as Indigenous peoples, are painfully aware of the absence of our 'narrative', which can be so easily accessed through various life writings. Engaging with this critically, Smith (2016) addresses that White critics tend to resist identification with Othello which stems from 'instituted disaffection and cultural desire to distance oneself from the abjection that is Blackness' (p. 109). Consequently, the 'othering' of Othello, that occurs through 'a salacious mix of claims about monstrous blackness' (Smith, 2016, p. 109), results in 'an epistemic assault on the Black body' (p. 108). Often the critical study of this text 'deals' with race, without 'dealing with' a critical awareness of race and how it functions and operationalises in society. This allows for the repression of knowledge and the 'complicity of Whiteness in the seemingly unending manufacture of blackness as a peculiar institution' (Smith, 2016, p. 109). This is damaging for Indigenous students in the classroom if glossed over as a theme to study rather than something to critically engage with and has a subtext that suggests that Blackness is only palatable when represented from a Eurocentric view that maintains social power and agency.

Notably though, many read Shakespeare's 'speaking for' a Black voice as a way to ensure the marginalisation of those subjugated by racism is addressed and to not do so would be to continually engage with the erasure of racism from the social agenda that allowed for White dominant frameworks and ignorance to stay intact (Smith, 2016). Arguably, this was true for Shakespeare's time where Black agency was limited and the inclusion of a Black voice was seen as radical. However, presently in a time where we can select texts where those subject to racism can speak for

themselves, I contend that insisting on including a colonial text that ‘speaks for’ the experience of another in a racialised way perpetuates yet another ‘act of ownership and erasure that reinstalls a privileged subject and strengthens existing hierarchies’, maintaining a ‘form of imperialism that ensures mastery over the one spoken for’ (Smith, 2016, p. 122). This paper draws attention to normative teaching practice, such as teaching Shakespeare due to his position in the canon, and how it is not questioned. This needs to change as Shakespeare’s portrayals of race, that lack representations of lived experience, could impact Indigenous peoples’ engagement with subject English. This is why, when I was allowed to choose my own texts for study, I privileged Aboriginal voices through literature to prevent subordination of Indigenous perspectives on experiences of racism.

### **As a teacher—teaching ‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence’**

Pilkington’s ‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence’ is labelled as life narrative and narrates an alternative ‘(hi)story’ of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal Australia (Klein, 2016). I had identified that English content that prioritised colonial texts was negatively impacting my year 11 students and chose to disrupt this by setting ‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence’ for study. This life narrative utilises epistemological, ethical, and historical counter-discourses which arguably unsettles non-Indigenous readers by exposing official historiography and its ideological underpinnings (Klein, 2016, p. 589), making it a pertinent text to teach to students while teaching on Aboriginal land. Critically engaging with this text allows readers to confront assimilationist policies, dispossession, and colonialism, and their ongoing impacts, in a way that ‘deconstructs the myth of the civilising mission of colonialism and exposes the hypocrisy of governmental policies regarding Indigenous Australians in the twentieth century’ (Klein, 2016, p. 589). The combination of affective and informative exploration of the past enables readers to confront and grapple with Australian history, potentially from a different perspective than what they had been previously taught (Klein, 2016). This was the case when I taught this text to my year 11 classes as their exposure to ‘Australian’ history in schooling had been fundamentally colonial. This meant that Indigenous life narratives for these students became a ‘weapon of cultural resistance’ whilst simultaneously being a ‘medium of self-expressiveness’ (Grossman, 2005, p. 295), making these texts critical and central to reconciliation (Attwood, 2008).

Life narratives expose the implications the colonial project have on Indigenous Australians and the portrayal of the past injustices and atrocities allows for readers to identify with the Aboriginal perspective (Klein, 2016, p. 589). Additionally, teaching and reading this text has ethical considerations as it draws on universal principles of justice (Klein, 2016). The consequent empathy with Aboriginal characters that arises through this shifting perspective positions young people to see the governmental assimilationist and removal policies as morally and ethically wrong (Klein, 2016). The text emotionally conveys the impact on families who are torn apart and the psychological consequences of forced child removal (Klein, 2016). This text is written by a ‘cultural insider’ and deliberately engages with traditional

knowledge, collaboration, memory, and orality (features common to Aboriginal life narrative as a genre) to accentuate its reliability (Klein, 2016). Pilkington's historical counter-discourse, by writing from an Aboriginal perspective and through the appropriation of historical documents, is transformative for the positioning of Aboriginal people as our resistance to colonial violence and oppression is privileged, undermining the racist ideals of White supremacy and authority of the twentieth century; additionally, rewriting the discourse in this way conveys Indigenous Australians as agents rather than victims (Klein, 2016). Through eloquent prison similes and imagery, the portrayal of suffering caused by the removal of children implies that the civilising mission should be focused on the re-education of the Whites as their understanding of what is supposedly civilised or uncivilised is at odds with the horror and pain inflicted on Aboriginal people (Klein, 2016).

The difficulty of overcoming the legacy of colonialism is conveyed through Pilkington's life narrative as the struggle and the need for empowerment is evident. Aboriginal life narratives speak of the colonial past (whilst highlighting how this has had ongoing effects) in order to ensure critical action can be taken in the present (Klein, 2016). The impact of this for Indigenous students cannot be understated as it disrupts the overarching narrative of Whiteness as supreme. As aptly stated by Klein (2016), Aboriginal life narratives 'urge us to listen to the voices of those who have been silenced for too long, not only in our understanding of Australia's colonial past but also most importantly in the continuous struggle to overcome its legacy' (p. 603). This aligns with Phillips' et al. (2022) belief that we must approach Indigenous texts with a 'willingness to unsettle inherited imperial genealogies of place and of knowledge' (p. 175). Engaging with texts in this way would require the readers to locate their position in the world, on place, aware of standpoint (Phillips et al., 2022). These reading practices with Indigenous literature would allow for a move away from more colonised versions of subject English (Phillips et al., 2022). As a teacher, I was willing to examine my own standpoint and views on literature to disrupt lingering assimilatory ideas present in subject English due to colonial dominance. Based on my observations, privileging Aboriginal literature in my year 11 classrooms was transformative for my students, evidenced by statements they made about their new understanding of Australian history and its impacts; this was only possible due to how they learnt from—and with—the powerful life narratives and the knowledges and truth telling within Indigenous literature.

## Conclusion

Overall, the material presented in this paper continues the dialogue around Indigenous education in Australia, specifically by examining subject English and its text selection. It unpacks canonisation and normative teaching practices that impact Indigenous students and wider socio-political onto-epistemologies. The paper has interrogated how English teachers are influenced to view literature and how teachers may be inadvertently subscribing to an idea that arbitrarily confers Eurocentric social agency and cultural capital, rather than one that champions diversity. The paper, from an Indigenous Standpoint and through its juxtaposition of the teaching

and learning of Shakespeare's 'Othello' and Pilkington's 'Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence', explains the importance of literature and its impact on teaching and student learning. The paper's examination of the presence of colonialism, and its consequent subordination of Indigenous perspectives in subject English, aims to remind educators that without being self-reflexive and critical of our own practices, what has become normative in our classrooms has ramifications on Indigenous peoples' affective positioning and on non-Indigenous students' understanding of history and its ongoing impacts.

It is imperative to challenge those who are avoiding embedding Indigenous perspectives into subject English for supposed fears of being 'tokenistic' as this dismisses an attempt before it has even been attempted (Shipp, 2013). As demonstrated with the discussion of 'Othello', it is also crucial that discussions of race and racism occur through presentations of lived experience and, in Australia, it is essential that this is done through privileging the life narratives of our First Nations people through texts such as 'Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence'. It is widely accepted that subject English is vital for teaching literacy knowledge, however, if traditional text selection continues to privilege colonial perspectives, students from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, with potentially different values to those perpetuated by the subject and the chosen texts, may be disadvantaged (Anson, 2021). In fact, the benefit of teaching Indigenous literature is not only for those outside what is deemed to be normative culture. By inviting different perspectives into the English classroom, students can critically engage with their own understanding of their world and contemplate how texts challenge this (Anson, 2021). Also, including literature from authors from the same cultural group, for Indigenous students, helps us feel as though we belong in the curriculum and that it is for us (Price, 2019). Practices like this would allow for the interrogation of normative Western notions of what constitutes authentic or legitimate knowledge as it is argued the current Eurocentric practices, beliefs, and values of Australian school culture reproduce hegemony whilst effectively creating 'Otherness' within non-European cultures (Hart et al., 2012). This was evident when I was taught 'Othello' and Indigenous voices were omitted from the discussion regarding racism in an Australian classroom, suggesting again that the privileging of colonial perspectives subordinates Indigenous perspectives.

In conclusion, this paper has begun to identify possible impacts prioritising the teaching of colonial texts on Aboriginal land could have on Indigenous students whilst suggesting the benefits for all students that teaching Indigenous literature can have. Ultimately, teachers must be willing to examine their own standpoint and views on literature to disrupt lingering assimilatory ideas that come through colonial dominance in subject English. Privileging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature in English can lead to a powerful advancement towards authentic reconciliation, and an acknowledgement that we can all learn from the powerful life narratives and the knowledge within them that have been shared with us.

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**Ethical approval** No ethical applications was required for this paper as all data was drawn from the author's personal experience. Not applicable to this research.

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