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Abstract

This paper explores how Australian literature mandated for study in the Victorian senior English curriculum creates opportunities for problematising central myths about Australia. We engage with Homi Bhabha's notion of ambivalence to demonstrate how representations of colonisation, rurality and migration reflect discursive formations of Australia. We consider how each discourse serves a pedagogic function, essentializing a set of myths about Australia: as having redeemed the violence done to Indigenous Australians in the colonial period, as embodying a white, rural masculine ideal, and as a welcoming nation open to migrants. Here, we show the points of orientation these texts provide, in their rearticulations of "the scraps...of daily life" (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 297), and further consider how the texts can problematize nationalist narratives.

Key words

Postcolonialism, Australian fiction, Homi Bhabha, pedagogy, nationalism, English teaching, the uncanny.

Introduction

Almost every student seeking to graduate from secondary schooling in Australia must study English. In the state of Victoria, the study of English is compulsory and centred on engagement with literary works. While there are four English subjects available – English, English as an Additional Language or Dialect, English Language, and Literature – the vast majority of students, approximately 80%, will study the mainstream English option, VCE English. The Victorian Certificate of Education mandates that the study of English involve literary texts

"drawn from the past and present, from Australia and from other cultures" (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2015, p. 5). The aims of the course require students to:

- analyse and discuss a range of texts from different periods, styles, genres and contexts
- understand how culture, values and context underpin the construction of texts and how this can affect meaning and interpretation
- analyse their own and others' texts, and make relevant connections to themselves, their community and the world.

The policy documents clearly articulate a rationale for this kind of cultural work. Studying literature contributes to the development of literate individuals capable of aesthetic appreciation, establishing connections to their own and other worlds. It also promotes the growth of critical and creative thinking, providing the means to challenge the ideas and stories that they encounter in their own world.

Australian literature remains a central component of senior secondary schooling in Australia. This paper will examine Australian literature from the Victorian senior secondary English curriculum. It will explore how representations of Australia construct the national subject in response to the guiding question: What spaces for contesting national discourse are provided through representations of 'the national subject' found in Australian Literature included for study in Victorian senior secondary text lists? We argue that contesting national discourses through the study of literature has the capacity to re-imagine notions of nation, and this work is always mediated by the texts available for study. We discuss three discourses from the 360 texts which appear in mandated text lists, 2010-2019: Indigeneity and colonisation, rurality, and migration.

Ambivalent Literature and the Pedagogic Imperative

While English seems to perpetually undergo revision and review (Beavis, 2018), the centrality of English at the hub of school curricula in Australia (Patterson, 2002), as well as its more traditional role exporting 'Englishness' (Doyle, 1989), has meant that debates about nation manifest in shifts in the significance of the texts selected for study.

For Bhabha, colonial and nationalist discourses aim to create normative subjects. The subject unconsciously internalizes colonial and nationalist power and knowledge to reproduce an image of the colonial and/or nation state (Bhabha, 1984, p. 126; 1990a, p. 297). However, these discursive practices or strategies which authorize this process produce an ambivalence, meaning that subjects are never fully effective at maintaining colonial and national power through discourse.

We argue Bhabha's theory is particularly useful for understanding the ambivalence of the texts identified for study; as on the one hand, we consider how these representations can work to essentialize a set of myths about Australia: as having successfully redeemed and reconciled for the violence done to Indigenous Australians in the colonial period, as embodying a white, rural masculine ideal, and as a welcoming nation open to migrants. Yet we also argue that, in their engagements with these three representations, the texts contain potential to present enough of the "scraps...of daily life" to problematize the image of Australia implied by these nationalist narratives (1990a, p. 297). The ambivalence between naturalized myths of, for instance, Australia's colonial origin and the materiality and divergent perspectives lurking within its mythologisation may cause antagonism. But encountered in the space of the classroom, it may also give rise to a productive re-imagining of the various idealized myths on which the nation-state of Australia constitutes itself.

Nationalist discourse is marked by a similar ambivalence (1990a) in which the homogenising myths of the nation-state jostle side-by-side with the "heterogenous histories of

contending people" (p. 297). This is productive because, as noted by Bhaba, the necessary ambivalence of discourse means that "no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves". Thus, while ambivalence may lead to the emergence of antagonism, it can also provide the potential for transformations in narrative to emerge and thus for national (and colonial) power to be undermined.

Understood in this way, we argue that the texts also tend to produce an image of what Gelder and Jacobs (1998, p. 23) have termed "uncanny Australia", or a sense of the Australian nation as a product of the "familiar and the unfamiliar". Where Australia is taken to be an ambivalent space – in Bhabha's words "a contested cultural territory" – different forms of knowledge, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, intersect and compete. By representing voices and stories that focus on the colonized, and various manifestations of settler-colonialism in the form of the rural and migrant stories, these texts present a contested and ambivalent intersections of ideas extending to terra nullius and the white farmer's claim to land, unceded Indigenous sovereignty and notions of country, and migrant experiences. Accordingly, we consider that the text lists may stage an encounter within the classroom with the potential for what Gelder and Jacobs call "unsettlement", or a discursive "realignment" of the essentialist myths of Australian nationhood which are maintained through the pedagogic function of nationalist discourse (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998, p. xvi).

The work of Bhabha and, in the Australian context, Gelder and Jacobs, show that the borders through which the Australian nation state constitutes and maintains itself are ambivalent and analysable. In what follows, we highlight how literature may afford students the opportunity to contest and re-imagine conservative ideas of the Australian nation and to question the subject-positions shaped by those discourses.

We offer this analysis fully cognisant of the English classroom as a pedagogic site, tasked with conferring upon students a range of practical literate abilities, including reading comprehension, spelling, grammar and written expression, as much as a site for cultural contestation. The pedagogic realities of the classroom, where meanings are exchanged, disrupted, and negotiated, can be acknowledged here. What becomes of any text in this context is dependent on a range of factors, just one of which is the literature selected for study. Nonetheless, the content of the curriculum represents a tool of the state, manifesting through educational systems that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1993) argues serve the purpose of cultural consecration, validating and legitimising some cultural products and not others. We offer below a reading of the idea of the Australian nation constructed by the discourses of colonisation, rurality, and migration, which circulate in the text lists. The purpose of our reading is not necessarily to model the precise interpretations of texts that secondary students may perform, or are capable of performing, in the classroom. Rather, our aim is to identify how the image of the nation-state which emerges out of these socially and culturally significant collections of texts is shaped by, and reflects, an ambivalent set of sometimes-conflicting interests and narratives. Our study, in this sense, aims to highlight the degree to which texts reflect the formation and image of the Australian nation as "contested cultural territory" (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 297).

Methodology

In a previous study (author withheld), we conducted a content analysis of the 360 texts which appeared on senior English curriculum text lists related to the subject VCE English between 2010 and 2019. It is worth noting that there are approximately 36 texts on each year's list, organized into two groups, and that each student will study four of these texts, two from each group, with text selection determined by teachers. All 360 texts were analysed by two readers (secondary English teachers and tertiary literature academics) highly familiar with the texts in

question. In this paper, we focus on texts coded as Australian Literature (defined by stories created by Australian authors or located in an Australian setting), and the representations of nation they provide. Thirty one percent of the 360 texts included substantial narrative elements set in Australia. Our study revealed that the text lists included thirty-six Australian texts, appearing 110 times across the ten-year sample. From these texts, we have identified three dominant themes in representation. These include: colonisation and the impact on Indigenous peoples, the rural myth and its homogenisation of Australia as white and masculine, and the experience of new migrants in Australia throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

To understand the findings of our content analysis, this paper adopts Homi K. Bhabha's work to emphasize the relationship between literature, discourse, and the myths of nations (1984). A content analysis is a flexible, quantitative method, which is useful for capturing and describing the textual artifacts of a society (White & Marsh, 2006). However, understanding the inferences or deeper meaning of the findings of a content analysis requires an additional method or theory, and in this case we adopt Bhabha's ideas for how literature can contribute to the image of the nation. The "impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force" (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 1) serves our aim to understand the pedagogic function of these texts and to offer an in-depth analysis of their significance, as they reflect how formal schooling can contribute to discourses of nationhood, especially the political and ethical imperatives associated with re-imagining.

Findings and Discussion

Representing Colonisation

Larissa Behrendt's novel *Home (2004)* is the only Indigenous-authored novel included across the ten-year period (it appeared for one year in 2010, although was also included in previous years not captured within this study). Peacock, Lingard and Sellar (2015) note the

tendency of texts authored by non-Indigenous writers about colonisation to exclude "Indigenous people from…a globalised future" (p. 368) by imagining them as "occupying an almost mystical past and present within the nation". *Home* challenges the over-determined authentic mythical view of Indigeneity by shifting the position of Indigenous peoples. In her novel, Indigenous figures are key, named protagonists who drive narrative action and change, thus shifting representation of Indigeneity from the mystical to the resolutely historical (this text is analysed in more detail below). *Mabo (Perkins, 2012)*, *Charlie's Country (de Heer, 2013)* and *Black Diggers (Wright, 2015)* are also three texts included in the lists that engage with tensions and conflicts of colonisation, all of which include Indigenous authorship. An alienation of settler-colonist identity from a sense of belonging can reverse the tendency toward a dehumanized representation of Indigeneity under colonisation. As Bhabha notes, questioning and undermining colonial logic demands something more complex than simply replacing negative, historical racist images with "new symbols of identity" (1991, p. 207), new "positive images" because these can only work to "fuel an unreflective identity politics". In this sense, Bhabha argues for textual representations that ask and reflect on "the 'we' that defines the prerogative of my present". *Mabo*, *Charlie's Country* and *Black Diggers* do not simply productively alienate non-Indigenous figures from a sense of belonging, they also position readers, and thus students, to engage with the ambivalence of identification and national discourse.

Rachel Perkin's *Mabo*, a made for television movie, portrays Eddie Mabo's journey as a struggle of devotion between public activism and his private, family life. Indigeneity is portrayed as exploited by the non-Indigenous Australian power – the film depicts how Mabo's adoption as a child, and absence from ancestral Murray islands, were (unsuccessfully) used against him by the Australian government in their argument in favour of terra nullius. Rolf de

Heer's film *Charlie's Country* and Tom Wright's play *Black Diggers* similarly engage in a productive alienation of settler identity from any naturalized sense of connection between culture and nation through the representation of complex Indigenous protagonists that are contrasted with dehumanized, almost mechanical, white police officers or military. This contrast positions the reader to reflect on the ambivalent nature of law, power and authority outside an impulse for redemption or – what Bhabha (1994) refers to through Franz Fanon – as the reminder of the "public image of the identity of otherness" (p. 123). This eschewal of the need for the redemption from guilt can show how the social and national is built upon a necessarily unresolved tension "of antagonistic interlocutions between positions of power and poverty, knowledge and oppression, history and fantasy, surveillance and subversion" (p. 122).

Analysing the presence of colonisation and the relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous identity in texts found on the lists requires further reflection on the paradoxes of colonial discourse. As noted by Kurtzer (2003), Australia post-1788, is stereotypically perceived as a simultaneous loss of traditional, or authentic, Indigenous identity (p. 86). The myth of terra nullius – the legal and literary fiction that saw Australia as a 'land belonging to no-one' prior to colonisation in 1788 until its over-turning in 1993 – is key to this paradox. This myth has been reinforced and reproduced through historical and literary self-serving fictions that offer redemption without political or material cost. Literature about Indigenous Australian literature included in texts selection lists primarily engages with past and present post-colonial Indigeneity and, in some respects, subscribes to the paradox of authenticity illuminated by Kurtzer.

In potential reflection of this paradox, our study found very few texts published or set within the colonial period prior to Federation in 1901. Only 12% of texts have portions of their stories set in pre-1913 world and no texts were published during the colonial period. There are,

in other words, no early or 19th century colonial texts to foreshadow and provide a material view for the political and textual landscape through which Indigeneity is mythically constructed in Australia today. Likewise, there are very few Indigenous authored texts that engage with and complicate paradoxical notions of authentic Indigenous identity. Most texts that do engage with constructs and repercussions of colonial Australia are retrospective, in that they are contemporary works written by non-Indigenous Australians reflecting back on history to offer a sense of redemption (Author Withheld). In this sense, the construction of national-identity within texts chosen for study at VCE level tend to mythologize without a sense of material ambivalence. We can see this mythologisation in, for example, Kate Grenville's (2005) *The Secret River*. This text appears on the lists three times (2010, 2011, 2019). The novel remains controversial because it thematizes that the cause of violence between settler-colonists and Aboriginals in Sydney in the early 19th century was the lack of dialogue between sides, and an inability to communicate due to differences in language (Leane, 2016). In this respect, the novel has been widely critiqued because it both redeems violence and undermines any notion of genocide, or systematic destruction, on the part of settler-colonists. At the same time, the novel's account of early settlement in Sydney famously does not include the voice of any Indigenous character, as Grenville herself admitted she did not feel empowered to represent their voices and felt their silence would be more productive (Kate Grenville in Clendinnen, 2006).

In her essay, "The History Question: Who Owns The Past?", historian Inga Clendinnen (2006) quotes the former Prime Minister John Howard and his assertion that history should possess a "structured narrative" that should be at once "objective" and "patriotic". While Howard is well known for his opinion that the colonisation of Australia should prioritize its idealisation, Clendinnen's essay is primarily addressed to Grenville's controversial novel and

its distortive representation of differences in language as at the heart of colonisation. Jeanine Leane (2010) similarly argues in her paper *The Whiteman's Aborigine* that such representation, where a non-Indigenous Australian author has represented, fictionalized and silenced Indigenous characters, reinforce dichotomies of powerful vs powerless "such representations are more accurately seen as a manifestation of white consciousness of Aboriginal Australians, rather than of Aboriginal Australians" (p. 33). In this sense, the narrative can be seen to subscribe to the over-determined colonial image that links progressive modernity with linear time – in other words, to the unambivalent idea that the novel itself can ensure progressive and redemptive change (Emre, 2017).

Similarly, Patti Miller's (2012) *The Mind of a Thief* (listed in 2012) is an auto-biography where Miller, a non-Indigenous author, explores, in part, what it would mean for her to have an Indigenous Australian identity and to truly belong. Miller's active exploration can be regarded as oppositional to the passive positioning of Indigenous figures in the text, as it is through these figures that the central character can realize and explore her own identity. *The Mind of a Thief* is reflexive on the subject of her drive to belong to Australia; she writes of a self-awareness of her agency, she has "something the Aborigines didn't – a sense that I belonged in the main story" (p. 195). Indigenous identity in the text is confined to an exploration of the impact of colonisation. The Indigenous characters thus take on a passive stance within the narrative world. Like Grenville's novel, the fictional representations of the Wiradjuri people lack agency as they are stereotyped within a colonial dichotomy of powerful versus powerless and are not constructed with any reference to a world outside the colonial gaze.

This familiar dichotomy is similarly retained in the poetry of Kenneth Slessor (1993), *Selected Poems*; however, Slessor's poems do purposively attend to the ambivalence of the subject-position of the poet, without attempts to redeem history or colonial violence, through playful language that draws attention to the historical-material dimension of colonisation, as opposed to pure reinforcement of naturalized, mythical or transcendent views of the colonisation of Australia as being without conflict or contingency. For example, in the opening stanza of the "Five Visions of Captain Cook" (1931), the poet draws attention to his own position in history enabled by colonisation: "So Cook made choice, so Cook sailed westabout, / So men write poems in Australia" (p. 115). Slessor highlights how Cook is thus the origin and material condition for which he can write the poem.

However, there is a lack of ambivalence within the naming and identification of locations and colonizers in his poems, the only recognisable signifiers are England and Scotland as well as Cook and other British figures. Colonized lands and peoples are never named but are represented through metaphorical description. Consider, for example, Slessor's description of the Indigenous Hawaiians who murdered Cook:

> And puzzled animals, killing they knew not what
>
> Or why, but killing . . . the surge of goatish flanks
>
> Armoured in feathers, like cruel birds:
>
> Wild, childish faces, killing; (p. 115)

There is historical ambivalence surrounding Cook's death (there are conflicting accounts for the reason why he was murdered and questions as to whether Cook himself triggered violence). This historical ambivalence is undermined in this poem, with the familiar image of martyr Cook and the 'savage' Indigenous Hawaiians. Slessor's poem concludes after Cook's death by returning the reader to England through the body of accompanying naval officer, Alexander Home whose eyes remain "marooned" in the colonies. This separation of Home's body from his mind's eye in the wake of Cook's death retains a sense of Bhabha's idea of the "time lag", which refers to the idea of history and its interpretation as ambivalent and without universal or objective significance (1991). The separation of Home's body (in Scotland) from his eyes, stuck in the colonies, performs Bhabha's notion of the time lag, where the historical significance of Cook's death is not primordial or universal, but seems to be represented as a death that has no unified or fixed significance, ensuring the colonizer's self-alienation described earlier.

Representing Rurality

A myth of rurality remains a stubbornly constituent feature of nationalist discourse in and about Australia. As Graeme Davison (2005) notes, "long after Australia has ceased to ride, economically, on the sheep's back, it seems to ride, spiritually, with the stockmen and drovers, squatters and farmers of the rural frontier" (p. ix) . In their recent survey of Australian popular fiction, Wilkins, Driscoll and Fletcher (2018) highlight the continuing relevance of this myth to the discursive fashioning of Australian nationhood, pointing to a recursion of narratives which form "the backbone of our white mythology of hardship [in the Australian landscape] and characters who overcome it: 'the Man from Snowy River, the farmer battler…'" (p. 6). These narratives draw on what Davison (2005) ironically terms the "glorious heritage of the Bush" to serve a pedagogic function in the construction of the Australian nation (p. ix). The

pre-given origin point implied by this rural myth articulates a homogenous idea of Australia as white and masculine, where the physical labour of figures like the male farmer is privileged over forms of labour which are typically gendered female, such as emotional labour. This myth accordingly conceptualizes what Gelder and Jacobs (1998) call the nexus of "place and the issue of possession" in settler-colonial terms: place as the Bush (and not Indigenous country), possession governed by the discursive framework of an imported system of British private property rights (p. 138).

Yet rurality emerges in the text lists as a more contested, and ambivalent, concept than this pedagogic myth would seem to suggest. One sign of this contestation is the sheer diversity of rural landscapes which are represented in the texts: from Western Australian Wheatbelt and salt flat (John Kinsella's (2003) selected poems *Peripheral Light*), inland tourist destination (the film *Jindabyne (Lawrence, 2006)*), Indigenous community (Larissa Behrendt's (2004) novel *Home*), the Australian outback (Robin Davidson's (1998) memoir *Tracks*), to the liminal space of a seaside country-town which exists at the boundary of the rural and the urban (Tim Winton's (1991) novel *Cloudstreet*). This diversity in the representation of landscape is evidence of Bhabha's "scraps, patches, and rags of daily life" (1990a, p. 297). It suggests the actual diversity of lived experiences of the rural, a diversity which is always at risk of being erased discursively by a pedagogic myth that identifies the concept as coextensive with rural frontier and the experience of the farmer.

The ambivalence of the rural is evident not only in texts which represent subject-positions that are heterogeneous to those implied by the myth (Indigenous, non-Anglo migrant, female), but also within those that engage with the discourse of the rural battler. For instance, the post-structuralist poetics of John Kinsella's selected poems, *Peripheral Light,* trades on that paradigmatic mythic symbol of rural labour – the farmer battler - in order to deconstruct it. Kinsella's poem 'The Machine of the Twentieth Century Rolls Through the High-Yielding

Crop' depicts the farmer's livelihood as under threat from a combination of the mechanisation of labour ("the guts of the machine work furiously") and ecological collapse ("the risks of intensive farming, tomorrow's worry") (2003, p. 71). Kinsella deconstructs the idea of the rural frontier as a mythic origin point cordoned off from the historical present. For Kinsella, the Bush is not a gloriously isolated space for characteristic displays of Australian self-sufficiency in the face of hardship, but is deeply imbricated in the problematics of a globalized present: the impact of global agricultural markets in the form of "intensive farming" (note the dark irony in the phrase "tomorrow's worry"); the existential threat posed to the farmer by climate change. These issues, Kinsella's poems suggest, are intractable if they continue to be conceived of in terms of a pedagogic myth of an Australian landscape which presents hardships to be stoically "overcome" (Wilkins et al., 2018, p. 6).

Labour, and the subject-positions implied by its various forms, is also a significant aspect of Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*. First published in 1991 amidst a severe economic recession in Australia but set between 1943 and 1963, *Cloudstreet* provides a kind of uneasy symbolic resolution of the economic anxieties of its moment of publication. In the course of doing so, however, it also problematizes the form of masculine, able-bodied labour idealized in rural discourse. One strand of the novel's plot gains its impetus from a permanent injury Pickles' family patriarch Sam sustains while working on a commercial fishing barge off the West Australian coast. It is this injury that galvanizes the Pickles family to relocate to the city of Perth from the country town of Geraldton. Like much of Winton's work, *Cloudstreet* is often read as erasing female perspectives; Hannah Schuerholz (2012), for instance, identifies significant "discursive silences" in Winton's "representations of femininity" (p. 33). To that extent, the novel retains the privileging of masculinity over femininity characteristic of rural discourse. But its articulation of rurality is also ambivalent: Sam and his family reject the discursive injunction to stoically "overcome" their hardship in the Bush, choosing rather to

journey from their rural origin to the city. The novel can accordingly be read as a narrative exploration of some of the discursive tensions and ambivalences in how gender, disability, and labour intersects in the discourse of rurality, and provide a space to critique the idea of the Australian nation which that discourse continues to project.

The inclusion in the text lists of the novel *Home*, authored by the Indigenous writer Larissa Behrendt, challenges the whiteness of the dominant strain of Australian nationalist discourse of rurality, serving to render the rural as "internally marked by cultural difference and the heterogenous histories of contending peoples" (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 299). In this novel, Candice, a young Indigenous lawyer, travels from Sydney to her ancestral country in central New South Wales. This journey is represented not simply as a translation in space (from urban to rural environment), but also time, as the narrative perspective shifts to Candice's grandmother's experience in her own youth as a member of the Stolen Generations. Candice's narrative thus reverses the spatio-temporal boundary crossing of the Pickles and Lamb families from the rural to the urban in *Cloudstreet*. Although the personal traumas of *Cloudstreet* are inflected by class, the whiteness of the working-class Pickles and Lamb families grants them a mobility from their rural origins. In *Home*, however, the middle-class professional Candice faces an urgent political need not to escape the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generations, but to wrench it out of a mythic, rural past so that its continuing legacy can be addressed in the historical present.

Home thus provides a significant counter-construction of rurality to that of a text such as *Cloudstreet*. Conceiving of rural environments not in terms of masculinity and whiteness – i.e. the Bush – but as Indigenous country, *Home* renders rurality as uncanny. Texts such as *Home* provide a stark example of, while also opening the space to critique, the homogenising and erasing effects of the pedagogic myth of rurality. Kinsella's poetry provides further material for contesting this myth. "Skylab and The Theory of Forms", for instance, concludes

with a glimpse of "Woomera. A roar that fills / the void of Terra Nullius" (2003, p. 74). While we consider discourses of migration in depth below, it is important to note here how Kinsella's poem grafts the subject-position of refugee, asylum seeker, so-called 'illegal-immigrant' onto the rural in the form of the town Woomera, the site of the Howard Government's notorious Woomera Immigration Detention Centre. The poem thus renders Australia as uncanny by staging an encounter, in a rural environment, between different forms of knowledge: the terra nullius of white Australia, the prior knowledges of Indigenous peoples that it seeks to erase, and the migrant knowledges imprisoned in Woomera. In its invocation of terra nullius (Kinsella's "On the Rejection of the Term 'Property' for this Place" also develops this theme) (p. 151), the poem suggests that an irreducibly settler-colonial logic is at work in white Australia's dispossession of Indigenous peoples and its displacement of the economic anxieties of a white, rural, working-class onto refugees.

Representing the Migrant Experience

Though the narrative of the Australian nation has always been tied to the migrant, "for those who've across the seas, We've boundless plains to share", there have always been groups of people whose otherness marks them. Their foreign tongues, coloured skins, and non-Christian heritages threaten the imagined community of the nation. Bhabha describes how these people, "wandering people who will not be contained by the *Heim* of the national culture" (1990a, p. 314), carry the voices and stories of those who speak the discourse of the melancholic and the migrant. Texts from across the lists capture these voices, through the experiences of post-WW2 migrants and the problematisation of their attempts to create new homes in Australia.

Unlike utopias, which present society in perfect form, these texts employ heterotopias, counter-sites that represent, contest and invert utopias (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Refusing to allow the Western nation to forget, and reminding the reader that while Australia may be safe

from war and conflict, it is not safe from the subjugation required from those migrants who must bridge old and new subjective positions, these stories resist the notion of an imagined Australian utopia.

Interment camps and detentions centres are heterotopic sites which represent places where entry is compulsory. Christine Piper's *After Darkness* opens with Japanese Doctor Ibaraki and other Japanese being forced into an internment camp in 1942 following the outbreak of war. The hostility from the guards, "rifles strapped to their shoulders, eyes darting to all corners of the terminal" is matched only by hostility from a white Australian mother who, daughter in hand, spits at the Japanese 'A glob landed on the window in front of my face. "Bloody Japs!' she said, shaking her fist', her features twisted with hate" (Piper, 2014, pp. 2-3). Despite serving as a doctor in Broom, Ibaraki's foreignness is a threat. Piper's depiction of the plight of these men displaces the historical narrative of an inclusive nation. It captures cracks and absences of historical memory, metaphorical on the margins but geographically located at the centre of the nation in the form of camps in the harsh Australian desert, allowing the exploration of new places from which to write histories of peoples (Bhabha, 1990b).

Detention centres are also a site for exploration in Najaf Mazari's memoir *The Rugmaker of Mazar-e-Sharif (Mazari & HIllman, 2008)*. The audience follows the humble rug-maker's journey escaping the Taliban in Afghanistan and into an Australian detention centre. It is here that the story's protagonist shares tales of suffering and exclusion. While he waits in Woomera Detention Centre, Najaf dreams. He sees himself walking down the streets of the big cities, looking in shop windows. He dreams of the rug shop he would one day open, and how wonderful it would be to have a car that he could wash every day. He dreams of owning a home, a small apartment at first, a place to bring his wife and daughter to. This image of a utopian Australia, a society in perfect form, is exposed as an unreal space as the consequences of long-term internment on Najaf and his peers are revealed through reflection on life in the

detention centre. The most graphic of these is the story of a man, so distraught by the rejection of his request for asylum that he stiches his own lips together. In that retelling, the camp fulfils its heterotopic function, acting as a mirror, opening up what is behind the surface. As Foucault (1986, p. 24) explains, the mirror makes the place occupied by the reader in the present moment as absolutely real, with all the space that surrounds it, and simultaneously unreal, since in order to be perceived it must pass through all that has come before. The result is that the detention centre, long a part of the creation of the Australian nation, is forced back into sight, and back into the centre, thereby contesting discourses of migration which seek to erase its presence from the image of the Australian nation.

While the above two texts reflect heterotopias that capture those in a state of crisis, seemingly safe spaces can also come to represent heterotopic spaces when they are reserved for those whose behaviour is deviant in relation to perceived norms. This is the case for migrant children who inevitably struggle with bridging old cultural norms associated with schooling, and new ones. Schools are sites laden with rites and rituals and those who do not, or cannot, enact these rituals are outcast. Alice Pung (2008) captures some of these individuals in a collection of autobiographic short stories from Asian-Australian authors, *Growing Up Asian in Australia*. Within this collection, schools are as a common site to depict what happens to those students whose behaviour does not adhere to norms.

Simon Tong's (2008) "The Beat of a Different Drum" juxtaposes two experiences of schooling. The first captures Simon's love of learning in a public school in Hong Kong, the latter details his transition from curiosity and glee about the prospect of moving to Melbourne to terror as he becomes "the new animal at the zoo" in his Australian high school. Tong's exoticism is contained, literally and metaphorically, as he is 'fenced in by concentric throngs of teenage boys', gawping and yawping at this new animal. "Do you eat dogs?", "Do you wipe your ass?", "Ching-chong Chinaman!" (p. 46). For Simon, silence offers no consolation, only

emboldening the students to tighten their circle and unleash further. The colonial gaze is inescapable and Tong's retelling of his first days in school represents what Bhabha calls mimicry, a double vision which discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse, and its prevalence even in 1980s Australia.

Similarly, Ray Wing-Lun's (2008) "Lessons from my school years" tells the childhood stories of Ray, the son of a Chinese man who had migrated to Australia when he was seventeen with no English. The social fantasy of a land that welcomes migrants is shattered by Ray's introduction to schooling. Sitting by the fence, counting the cars go by at lunchtime, Ray is approached by Tony, the biggest boy in his class, with three or four kids behind him. "Ching chong!" they chant (p. 92). "Does he even know how to talk?", they taunt, before beating Ray, "covering him in red marks and bruises". Ray has been marked by the nation. The history that happened elsewhere, in the cracks and voids, is brought to the fore. We are forced to confront Ray's face, battered by the Western nation's obsession with racial purity.

Aditi Gouvernel's (2008) "Wei-Lei and Me" details the painful exclusion suffered in the school-yard as a result of her Indian heritage. The playground becomes a site of total isolation as Aditi is pushed to the margins. The body from which she cannot escape becomes a carrier for a perceived filth, "I'll have to wash this shirt now – you wipe your butt with your hands" (p. 75), which comes represent an infection that can be caught by those who might associated with her, "Don't touch the fort! You'll get her germs" (p. 76). The rejection of her body manifests into the silencing of her voice, "over the next couple of days the kids stopped talking to me, as though my words, like my body, carried an infection their immune systems couldn't fight". While the bullying begins with a single boy, it quickly spreads to the entire student population, exposing the reality that schools reflect larger cultural beliefs, and children, as much as adults, must bear the brunt of a nationalism that will not tolerate the other.

Across all three stories, the new students are constructed as uncivilized by students and teachers alike. They wipe their asses with their hands, they eat dog, they don't know how to swim. The response from all of these students is survival, and survival means not being noticed. They become ghosts, they disappear into the hidden creases of the school yard, the margins are where they live, at school and in Australia.

Through their stories, the loss of their innocence, and the denial of the joy they should have been able to experience through schooling, is written back into consciousness. They are brought from the margins back to the centre. We are forced to confront the historical memory that Western nations are obliged to forget (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 316). The retelling of the persecution of children, Simon, Ray and Aditi, elicits the racist fantasy of nation, opening up a void in the present. These stories accordingly contest a discourse of migration which seeks to construct an idea of Australia as a land of opportunity which stands open to migrants.

Schools are used in these stories as heterotopic sites that contain incompatible spaces. Schools as utopias that enculturate the ideals of the nation through learning and schools are sites of exclusion and punishment for those who dare to be other. Any remaining notion the reader might have of nation as a project of modernity and a sign of progress is made ambivalent, as we are reminded of how institutions turn children into "worthless objects" (Wing-Lun, 2008, p. 93), to be physically and mentally punished. The nation is not for them, and they are reminded constantly to stay far away, "I watched everything from an aluminium bench" (Gouvernal, 2008, p. 77), lest they attract any attention and be punished again.

Conclusion

Our focus on contemporary manifestations of policy regarding the teaching of Australian literature has considered how texts lists are tools for the formation of subjects, subject identities and nation. Our analysis of the composition of the VCE text lists from 2010-2019 suggest that these text lists have some capacity to develop a sense of the Australian nation as a product of

the “familiar and the unfamiliar” (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998, p. 23), an ambivalent space where different forms of knowledge, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, intersect and compete. While the text lists contribute to broader cultural projects of nation-building and identity formation, there is a degree of ambivalence in the ways in which they function as tools in the construction of these cultural projects.

Curriculum which determines what counts as literature worth studying in the senior secondary years has the capacity to govern what is included in the narrative of the nation. Our analysis of how texts found on VCE English text lists explore themes of colonisation, rurality and the migrant experience, reinforces the importance of young people having access to literature which explores national discourse as “contested cultural territory” (Bhabha, 1990a, p. 297). As our analysis shows, possibilities for re-imagining narratives of nation are tied to the stories that become the focus of classrooms study. While re-imagining as a tool of political and ethical interpretation is necessarily entwined with those pedagogies that realise the study of literature, it is also connected with the stories themselves.

As Beavis (2018) argues, national identity is always at stake in the conflicts over the texts of English. For this reason, we suggest continued study and interrogation of the curriculum and text selection lists is necessary. This will ensure that text selection retains the vitality of ambivalence, given the continuing power imbalances and social inequalities that have resulted from the colonisation of Australia.

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